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OTHERS MAY DIE

BY

SARAH CHAPMAN

“We do these things... that others may live”

Motto for the National Association of Search & Rescue (NASAR)

“Hunting is now to most of us a game, whose relish seems based upon some mystic remembrance, in the blood, of ancient days when to hunter as well as hunted it was a matter of life and death.”

Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization. Vol. 1: Our Oriental Heritage* (1935)

Prologue

Oh, how he hated the fuck who invented the jog bra. It had to have been a woman. Would that make her a fuckette? No man would have made something so...constrictive. So against Mother Nature.

Of course, this one didn't have much to mash, so he wondered idly why she bothered. Probably just a part of her look, the "I'm serious about this, look at these gluts" thing. Her excuse would be that it was still so hot, the sun still high in the early June evening. No-frills ponytail, raggedy tank top that covered the detested bra but not much else, the shorts just that little bit too short, riding up her thighs as she churned up pavement.

But for all her strength and speed, she was no match for him, her head bowed and ears plugged. If he closed his eyes, he could almost hear the tinny crap coming out of the ear buds. She was at the corner now, managing to look both ways without breaking stride. What a good little girl.

As soon as she was across he started the engine. It was so easy. She'd been so close and so oblivious, buried in her endorphin high. He cruised behind her for a block, watching said gluts move. Thank heavens for the neighborhood speed limits. For a moment he worried that she somehow sensed him, throwing a look over her shoulder at the road and then picking up the pace. Enough of this clandestine shit.

She didn't even blink or slow when he cut in front of her into the little grocery store parking lot. It was closed, because he wasn't an idiot. This busy Nashville street, this yuppie center, so close to Belmont University? Just enough businesses to be surprisingly empty after evening rush hour.

He stepped out of his van and circled the front just as she passed, a mere ten feet away. She didn't spare him a glance. He walked to the corner of the building, but resisted an urge to peek after her. There was no need to be sneaky. He leaned against the brick to wait, one last glance around. No one in sight, despite all the cars. The church school across the street. The stained glass shop across the parking lot. He allowed himself one treat, slipping his hand into his pocket for a quick stroke. So hard. So ready. There was no need to be sneaky, but no need to burn daylight either.

With a casual glance at his watch, he timed it. She'd be at the next corner now, but wouldn't allow herself a break. Oh no, my little tiger. No water for you. She'd reverse her course and would be approaching to pass back by him.....just about.....now.

When he turned the corner, he realized he'd waited a second too long; she was almost on top of him. Panic churned his gut and instinct took over. He threw out a hand to her, almost imploringly. This was not a part of the plan, but it felt right. He was still in the game.

And it worked, her ingrained manners bubbling to the surface. She slowed, popping out the ear buds. Confusion, but no alarm. "Can I help you?"

Oh yes. Yes you can. He pulled out the gun.

Section I
PLS
(Point Last Seen)

Definition:

The last known location of a search subject,
visually verified by at least one witness

“Down.”

Angie Thibodeaux tried to keep the edge of panic out of her voice, but she wasn't sure she'd succeeded. She couldn't tell what he was going to do. For a full thirty seconds they stared at each other, Angie willing him to move. Please listen, please. Please. She didn't believe in ESP, but if there was ever a chance, her mind was screaming at him loud enough for the world to hear. Begging. Don't screw this up. We've worked too hard.

And still he stared at her, not moving. His eyes were wide, blazing in their intensity. A slight grin on his face. A tiny bit of her was afraid he might actually stick his tongue out at her. Angie took a deep and shaky breath and tried again,

“Down.”

She felt more than heard the reverberation of displeasure from her left. Ray Waddes hadn't moved. Feet planted shoulder length apart, uniform cutting a crisp line down to shined black boots. Arms crossed over his chest, his moustache hadn't even twitched but she knew he disapproved. She shouldn't have to repeat herself. It was now an official battle for control. And Angie was losing.

It was enough to piss her off, so she channeled all of her anger into her glare. She leaned slightly forward, rolling up onto her toes to emphasize every inch of her slight frame. Crossed her arms and pulled her best impression of Ray. She had about ten more seconds before it all went to hell.

Because he probably knew this, Shalako finally caved. Slowly, just to make sure she knew it was merely the illusion of control, her black, 80 pound German Shepherd tentatively placed one paw slightly forward, then slid both forward and settled into a down position with a “harrumph”. Like he'd never laid down before on command. As if they hadn't practiced this nightly for the past year. Angie was going to kill him if they survived this.

She hadn't realized she was holding her breath, and it all raced out of her with a powerful whoosh. She let her shoulders slump for a split second before she remembered that they were not quite done. Shalako was on the ground, about five feet away from her on the rug of the state park lodge where they were conducting this portion of their wilderness search and rescue test. And they hadn't failed it. Yet. It was cause for a momentary celebration. So Angie took a moment to survey their surroundings. The lodge was old and large, a log cabin with gleaming hardwood floors and dusty area rugs, a crackling fireplace and faded stuffed furniture. To her right was the incongruous addition – a seventies style buffet restaurant that had been built off the back of the original building.

At the entrance a buxom blond young thing was splashing water into glasses placed precariously on a folding tray.

So, of course, that's where Dave was. And he appeared to be making some headway with her, but Angie was guessing that his Search and Rescue uniform was helping. Dave Wilson had been an assistant funeral director in a previous career – and now was a volunteer on Middle Tennessee Search Dog Association as well. He was as much an oddity as she was, she decided. He'd spent his childhood in a family-run funeral home, he'd been THAT kid growing up. Only he'd eventually, to his father's dismay, broken ranks with the family and become a computer programmer (and bedroom hacker) extraordinaire. Angie supposed it was no weirder than her own career path - music industry quasi-hotshot to Appalachian Outdoor Sports retail "team member," current expert on camping stoves and thermal long underwear.

Dave had a young dog named Troy that he wanted to train to be a human remains recovery dog. A gruesome but necessary function for any search team. Of course, the goal was to find any missing person alive and well, and that's where Angie and Shalako, her two year old Search and Rescue canine partner, came in. Hopefully. If they survived this first part of their certification test. Obviously, they were the rookies on the team. But in the six months she had been working with MTSDA, she really felt that Shalako had blossomed. She had blossomed. She could now read a compass, so her days of chasing Shalako's tail through the woods were over, and the poor soul who had volunteered to hide from him could now rest easy that she could find her way back out once they had "rescued" him. Topographical map? No problem. And thanks to Ray's careful training, Angie had rappelled off a seventy foot cliff the week before. She really did feel a little bit more like a bad ass now. Just a little bit. She'd even switched her cheap watch to read military time, although she still had to subtract twelve hours in her head if it was after noon.

As if on cue, Dave looked up and grinned at her. And actually wriggled his eyebrows behind the Sweet Young Thing's back. He was supposed to be there as Angie's moral support. Nice. It certainly served to jar Angie back to the task at hand. She returned her gaze to her dog, lying obediently at her feet. And grinning at her. Shalako knew they still had one more obedience task to complete in order to pass this first part of the test to become certified as a search team. Up until now, while Angie had been able to help on several small wilderness foot searches, Shalako had been in training. Hopefully, in the next minute, that would be one huge leap closer to changing.

She gave Shalako a reassuring smile and turned her back on him, shooting Ray a quick glance to judge his mood. Impossible to tell, but that was not surprising. Angie took another deep breath and forced herself to walk away from her dog. This all seemed so easy when they had practiced it every night in Angie's cramped living room. Angie needed to walk about ten yards away from her dog, across the great lodge room, and then turn and call him to her. Shalako was supposed to stay motionless until she gave him the word. Then, he was supposed to come directly to her and sit himself in front of her. So simple. If they completed this, then they should pass the obedience portion of the two-

part test. Tomorrow they would face their greatest challenge – a search in sixty acres of wilderness for a volunteer “victim”. But that was tomorrow’s worry.

Angie heard a jingle from Shalako’s collar and it took all of her power not to turn and peek at him. Had he gotten up? Or just shifted on the ground? If he moved now, they automatically failed. Strict obedience was Ray’s first requirement of a good working dog. Her feet seemed to move in slow motion. Angie was so stressed it was almost like a near death experience – except, instead of her own life flashing before her eyes, she saw her and Shalako’s joint life passing before her as she slowly put one boot in front of the other.

Shalako was still very much a puppy at the ripe old age of two years. He was a German shepherd, jet black in color with medium length hair. Angie thought he was beautiful, at least when he sat still long enough for her to study him. Most people just thought he looked like a wolf. He had started life off as a failure – when he was one year old, the Atlanta Metro police force decided he was not aggressive enough to train for their K-9 unit. So Shalako had retired from his training and Angie had taken him in, after he’d had several failed homes, through a friend of a friend. And what a handful he had been – wild and unruly, able to knock her down with his puppy energy. She had been at her wit’s end and about to give him up when she had what she called “The Moment.”

Single women know about the TV channel Animal Planet. And any true animal lover has probably watched countless late night “Animal Cop” re-runs. Angie was no exception, so it was an average late Friday night of TV viewing that completely re-arranged her life. She would cheer out loud as the ASPCA animal cruelty investigators of New York City busted the bad guys and saved the lives of countless abused animals. One rescued dog reminded her so much of Shalako that she ended up in tears. He looked nothing like her baby, but his temperament was a dead-on match. He was hyper, he was loud, and he NEVER seemed to sit still. Play, play, play – just watching him was exhausting. When the ASPCA woman on the show announced that this particular dog should have a job to do to keep it busy, Angie sat up straighter on the couch and eyed her own little monster, who was chewing on his favorite toy. By the end of the show, the rescued dog was on his way to being a drug sniffing dog for the NY police. By the end of the show, Angie was determined that Shalako was going to go back on a police force. Somehow, some way.

Of course, that really wasn’t going to work, since they had fired him in the first place, so Angie did some more research and stumbled on the idea of search and rescue. And she tested Shalako, to the best of her ability, in a couple of different areas. She already knew he was smart, from an unfortunate incident when he had figured out how to open the refrigerator door. He had an incredible need to play, all the time. Angie pitied the fool who thought they could deprive him of his squeaky bunny. Nothing in this world came between Shalako and his pink squeaky bunny.

So all on her own but with the powers of the Internet to guide her, Angie went to work on Shalako. Little games at first, like “hide the bunny” and “bark for the bunny”. Shalako ate up the attention and came back for more, so Angie began to enjoy teaching him. She

taught him tricks, she re-taught him obedience, and slowly but surely the wild one calmed down. Over time she connected the games together, and pretty soon she had a budding search dog on her hands. “Hide the bunny” became “make poor friend run into the woods with the bunny and send Shalako to find her.” It was slow going, but both of them enjoyed the work. Shalako began to use his nose during the games, and the searches got longer and more difficult, bit by bit. When she’d been at it about six months, Angie realized she needed help. Her friends no longer wanted to wait in the woods for hours on end for Shalako to find them. So she hit the Internet again, and found MTSDA.

Her first training session with the team left much to be desired. Shalako forgot everything he knew and ran around in circles. Angie forgot everything she knew, and realized she’d never known much to begin with. But the people on the team were very nice and encouraging, and gave her so many good pointers that she decided Shalako might have a chance. And now he was really doing well, about to take his first certification test so that he could actually be used on a real search. But it had been a long, hard road. Hours and hours of training, in all types of weather, on all types of terrain. And that was all training for HER – she’d had to learn about so much besides working her dog - search techniques, rescue operations, first aid, orienteering...the list went on and on. But the real fun in MTSDA had been watching Shalako grow into a working dog.

And now it was all on the line. With a fresh rush of adrenaline Angie realized that the direction she’d picked to walk was straight towards the front door of the lodge. Did Shalako think she was going to leave him? If he did, there was no way he was staying put. She found herself relying on the ESP she’d never believed in again to urge him to stay put. There were no more jingles, so she hoped she was still on solid ground.

Sensing the tension, even Dave and Sweet Young Thing had turned to watch. Angie reached her stopping point and turned slowly to face her dog. She preemptively held up a hand to stop him from moving. Shalako was so intent on her face she thought he might spring out of his skin. He was still in position, but just barely, his whole body vibrating with excitement. Angie shifted only her eyes to Ray, who gave her a curt nod. Show time.

“Shalako, here.” The words were just out of her mouth when her dog exploded from his position with a joyful yelp. Angie’s heart soared. They were going to do it. With matched glee, Shalako leapt forward and charged towards her. They were going to pass. She could feel a smile spreading across her face. And relief flowing through her body. She felt like a pile of mush.

In retrospect, Angie saw the change in Shalako’s body language first, before she even realized anything was wrong. In a split second, something about his trajectory changed. His eyes shifted somehow. He was about halfway to her when she figured out the problem. Shalako, all 80 pounds of him, was bearing down on her for a triumphant finish. However, he had run out of rug and was now skittering towards her on nothing but slick hardwood floors. Their usual finale, where he would race towards her, pull up

on a dime and sit down a mere foot or two from her, was not going to happen. Not even close.

Shalako, trying to counteract the momentum that he could no longer control, squatted into a sitting position a good ten feet away from her in an attempt to abort his charge. The shift in his center of gravity did slow him down. Barely. It also caused him to start spinning. The only sound in the room was the frantic scratching of Shalako's nails across the floor. Like a caricature of old cartoons, Angie stood rooted in shock as her dog careened wildly towards her. What should she do? If she leapt out the way, would they fail? If she didn't, would she die?

Angie had time to meet Ray's eyes and allow her flight or fight response to solidly land in the "flight" corner, and then Shalako was upon her. She braced her self while turning her back to run. And Shalako braced himself as well, with much more success. He hunched over and swept right through her at knee level. A perfect tackle in the football world. Her view of the lodge was suddenly enhanced to three hundred and sixty degrees and in a moment she saw it all – Dave and Sweet Young Thing, whose mouth formed a perfectly painted "O" as she unknowingly flooded a water glass. Then the ceiling of the lodge, flickering and dancing in the firelight. And finally an almost upside down view of Ray, still unmoving except for eyebrows raised in surprise. She didn't make it all the way around to kiss the floor, but landed almost directly on the back of her head and the top of her shoulders. Gravity took its job seriously and dumped the rest of her in a discombobulated heap on top of herself. But she was alive. And mostly alert.

Her first conscious thought was for her dog. Was Shalako okay? Had she hurt him? She struggled up to find both Ray and Dave leaning over her, urging her not to move. Screw that. She batted hands away and sat up, looking around for Shalako. He was fine, not a foot from her boot tips. Sitting and watching her, paws still a little splayed from his ride. To the others, he probably looked like nothing had happened, but she could see the confusion in his eyes.

"I'll check him out, I'll check him. Just stay down." Ray had read her mind and said the most comforting words possible. Relief directed her butt right back onto the wooden floor as she struggled to assess the damage. Rattled brain? Check. Jarred spine? Check. Goose egg? Not yet, but looking promising.

"Is he okay?" Her voice was hushed in her own ears and she wondered if she'd said it aloud.

Ray was thorough and quick in his assessment. "He's fine. Are you?"

She nodded and put her hand on Dave's shoulder to push herself to her feet. Dizziness threatened so she stayed bent over with hands on knees for a minute to focus on her breathing. It was the click-click-click of high heels that brought her back to the present. Carefully painted toenails danced into her field of vision, out of place against her own beat-up hiking boots. High heels? In a state park lodge? At the end of winter? Sweet

Young Thing. Angie twisted her neck around to look up and meet the young woman's concerned gaze, instantly regretting the movement. Wordlessly, the woman held out a small red first aid kit. Angie finally found the energy to laugh, although it sounded to her own ears a little bit like a sob. Just a little.

Angie pushed herself up to full height, a mere five foot and a bit, and turned to Ray. He'd stepped back and was watching her in a measured fashion, taking his own stock of her injuries. She gave him her best, most stoic grin.

"I'm really okay. Banged my head a bit. That's all." He nodded because he'd probably already reached the same conclusion. But he still looked like he was waiting for something. Following his pointed glance, she turned to Shalako, still at her feet. He was motionless in the exact same, splayed paw sit. Facing her, but rotated a perfect one hundred and eighty degrees from where he should have been. Eyes never having left her at any point in the debacle.

"It's okay, boy. Good job." She released him from the maneuver with as much joy in her voice as she could muster. Shalako was at her side in a flash, sniffing his own damage assessment. She bent over to him and pulled his head close to hers and gave him a good hard scrub through his fur. She was proud of him, even in spite of the disastrous ending to the obedience test. It wasn't his fault. It was poor forethought on hers. Keeping one hand on her dog, she stood and looked to Ray for guidance.

Ray Waddes was the head of Angie's SAR team, and by far the most experienced in search & rescue. Twenty-seven years on the Las Vegas police force, the last twenty spent on the SWAT team, Ray was tougher than any man Angie had ever met. Seeing the need in Nevada, he'd founded and built a top rate search and rescue team during his tenure on the police department. It was still the biggest team in the state to that day. Small and wiry, Ray was in better shape than most college athletes. He and his wife Sally had retired to Nashville. Out of boredom he had started the Middle Tennessee Search Dog Association several years before.

Now he stared at her with inscrutable eyes. Angie held her composure, meeting his gaze and waiting for the bad news. It'd be fine. She wasn't giving up. They'd try again in a couple of months. Just chalk it up to a learning experience. Damn wooden floors.

Heaving a sigh, Ray turned towards the door. "Get your things. It's late."

"Sure. Thanks, Ray. Sorry about the ending." Angie could hear the forced joviality in her own voice. She bet Shalako did too, so she gave him one more reassuring rub before turning away from him to hide her tears. Where the hell did she leave his leash, anyway?

"Oh. One more thing..." Ray had turned back, halfway through the door.

"Congratulations."

Angie's heart leapt as she spun back to face him. She couldn't find words so the moment stretched on. Dave was suddenly between them, giving himself a good case of whiplash by frantically trying to see both their expressions at the same time.

Ray hadn't even cracked a smile. "For passing the obedience portion of your exam. Congratulations. I'll see you at 07:00 hours tomorrow morning. Right in front of the lodge. For the rest of the certification test." And with that, he was gone, but Angie knew he must have heard Dave's whoop of joy as the door swung closed.

Angie couldn't stop grinning. She was still in the lodge, watching static-y and currently muted television, way too wired to even consider retiring for the night. But it was almost 10:00pm, and she knew she should be taking Shalako back to the cabin and his crate. He'd given up on her about a half hour before and was snoring gently by her boot tips. Across the great room, Dave was still pursuing the waitress, and had obviously made some progress because he was programming her number into his cell phone. Good for him.

With only a small, almost inaudible groan, Angie pushed herself to her feet and roused her pup.

"I'm heading out." She announced to no one in particular. No one in particular didn't respond, so she announced it again, louder this time.

"I'm heading OUT." Dave finally loped over. They'd been good friends since she'd joined the search team. He'd been relatively new to search and rescue as well, and they'd been paired up to do a land navigation course at one of her first trainings. To say it hadn't gone well would be an understatement – they'd gotten so lost, that even with radio contact Ray had had to send out several of the search dogs to find them. Quite embarrassing but a pretty good bonding experience. They'd sat, huddled under a tree because it had started to rain, and Dave had waxed poetic about magnetic forces that could have skewed their compass readings. Angie had listened politely and decided that he was one of the smartest and strangest people she'd ever met. He was small, not much taller than she, with slightly unruly black hair that tended to always look like a bad case of bed head. Since they'd become friends she'd noticed that he'd started to care more about his appearance, but his attempts at fashion did tend towards a retro ruffled look. It was funny to watch him with her music industry friends. Appearance was so, so very important to most of them, and they assumed that Dave worked very hard to look like he did. She knew better. Right now he stood, shirt untucked and one boot untied, eyeing her carefully.

"You really feeling okay?"

She grinned at his worry. "I'm much better, now that we've passed this part. And I'll be doing even better tomorrow, once we find you."

Dave, there as moral support, was doing double duty as the volunteer "victim" for the second portion of the certification test, the all-important 60 acre solo search. Just thinking about it sent made Angie's stomach roil.

Dave threw an arm out to her. "Come. I will escort you to your cabin."

Angie elbowed him away. “Nah. I know you have bigger.....concerns.” This with a not-so-subtle look at Sweet Young Thing, who had introduced herself as “Cherie. No last name. Just Cherie.” Of course, she was trying to make it in the music business.

Dave had the grace to look offended. “I’m not letting you walk back by yourself. Didn’t you hear about the missing Vandy student?”

It had been all over the news for two days straight. In fact, it had been the only news for two days straight. Junior Shannon Berkemeier had said good night to her house mate, closed her bedroom door, and vanished. The sight of her father, his quivering lips the only sign of an unfathomable pain, stoic beside a sobbing mother, choking as she described her daughter and pleaded for her return, was seared into Angie’s brain. There were no leads. And since she had been wearing her pajamas, no clothes missing, purse, keys and cell phone left behind, foul play was suspected.

As if to lend credence to Dave’s concerns, the local news started right at that moment. Shannon’s sparkling smile from happier days hung over the anchor’s left shoulder, marred by the a blood red “missing” stamped over her face. So dramatic. Kylie McNamara from WKRN Channel 5 had appropriately arranged her perky features to transmit both sorrow and urgency, matching her tone of voice perfectly, as she gave an update that wasn’t really an update. A flash to the press conference with the parents, and then onto a live interview with an older lady who was crying. Interest piqued that there might be new info, Angie hit the volume button on the cracked remote. The lady turned out to be Shannon’s second grade teacher. And she was upset and couldn’t believe that Shannon was missing. She was such a good girl. She’d never run away. So, really, no news. Angie muted it again.

Shalako had staggered to his feet by this point. With an un-manly squeak of a groan along with a stretch he was ready to go.

“It’s a 50 yard walk, max. I’ve got Shalako. I’ll be fine.” Shalako gave a weak tale flop at her words.

“Well, I’ll at least walk you out.” He was determined. But not stupid. “Cherie, give me a call on my cell when you finish up, okay?”

They pushed open the double doors simultaneously and Shalako dragged himself behind. It’d been a big night and he was ready for bed, there was no doubt. Angie had finally come down off her adrenaline high and was starting to crumble herself.

They walked in silence, passing Ray’s cabin, the first in the row. With the light still on, Angie could picture him in there, carefully polishing his boots. Or his gun.

Dave cleared his throat. Uh-oh. Here it comes.

“Did you hear? It’s out.” She could tell without turning her head his way that he was watching her with a searching look.

“I know, I’ve always known it would be coming out around now.” She tried to put a smile on her face.

“How are you doing with the whole thing? Have you taken a look?”

“Oh, it’s cool. No big thing. I’m fine. I’m sure it’s just a great read, I knew it would be.” Not even marginally convincing to her own ears.

“Look, I’m sure it’s a little weird, but I’m here if you need to talk about anything.” She didn’t. She gave him a bright smile and assured thanks and picked up her pace a bit.

He was going to say something else, but the unmistakable strains of “Baby’s Booty Bump” erupted from his pants pocket. Angie didn’t have to fake a smile. Dave and his niche rap ringtones. They always made her music industry friends wince.

Dave fished it out. “Hello?”

He turned his back on her and her grin widened. Perhaps Dave would get lucky tonight after all.

“Yeah.....okay.....be right there.” He hung up and turned back to her with a secretive smile.

“Gotta run. See ya.” And he was headed back to the lodge.

She watched him go and then had a thought just as he hit the door.

“Hey! What’s *my* special ring?” He turned back, gave the same smile, and disappeared through the door.

Angie turned and continued to crunch along the wooded path to her cabin. She could see a translucent moon peeking through the trees. The chill and silence sunk in and Angie wished for spring to hurry. It’d be an easier search tomorrow without deep leaf cover, that was for sure. But she would miss the new green, the buds, the cacophony of a forest coming out of hibernation. Right now it was so quiet, as if the trees were holding their breath.

Too quiet. Where was Shalako?

Angie stopped almost at her cabin and looked around. She hadn’t worried about a leash for the short walk and now regretted the decision. He must be nearby. What if he’d caught the trail of something? Deer, raccoon.....he’d put nose to ground and go. She’d

seen him lose track of everything around him, so entrenched in the scent that he'd go for miles without looking up.

She called his name softly, almost afraid to disturb the heavy air. Nothing. Raising her voice a little, she tried again. Her flashlight was in the cabin, with the rest of her pack. She felt unexpectedly vulnerable in the open area out in front of the cabin. Moonlight was brighter here, but made the surrounding woods seem all the more dense and unwelcoming. She wished she'd thought to leave a light on when they went to dinner.

The first rustle was almost too soft to hear, almost like an expelling of breath across the back of her neck. Angie spun around and called his name again, this time forcefully. She could see nothing past the clearing, but the sound was getting louder. For a second it seemed to switch locations, as if the trees were protesting the disturbance. Angie stepped back carefully towards the stairs that lead up to her cabin.

To her left the woods exploded as a dark form leapt towards her. Instinct sent her scrambling backwards, and as her foot skidded off the bottom edge of the stair she lost her balance and sat down hard. The shadow flew past and she had a glimpse of his silhouette as he charged the far side of the clearing. Shalako was heading towards the rustling bushes across the way, intent on something she could not see. A squirrel or a raccoon, most likely. Anger colored her vision as she pulled herself up and went after him, screaming in a less than dignified manner.

Just as she got to the edge of the clearing he bounced back to her, tail wagging, tongue lolling from a fun chase. If she could have picked him up she would have, but instead Angie settled on grabbing him by the scruff and dragging, lecturing him as if he were an errant schoolboy.

Only when she'd hauled him in and shut the door did she relax. Rubbing her eyes, she glanced at the TV in the corner of the cabin. She probably didn't need to see any more of the news. This Shannon stuff was getting to her. She needed a distraction. Time to call home.

The cell sounded tinny as it rang. Angie had to remind herself they really weren't that far from Nashville. It just felt like nowhere. Cheatham County State Park was 45 minutes northwest of the city. Not far. It sounded a whole lot closer when Veronica's voiced boomed out of the handset. It was hard to distinguish the hello from the wave of music behind it. Jamie Newsome and Veronica Handler were both country music songwriters, and Jamie had recently released his debut album. Tonight they were going to celebrate with one of Veronica's southern style feasts – ham, fried chicken, and all of the “fixin's”. A veteran of Jamie & Veronica's get togethers, Angie could picture the scene back at the farm. “Pickin' parties” were a Nashville treat – it seemed everyone in the entire city was a songwriter with a new song to share, so many social gatherings turned into informal concerts. Having lived in Tennessee for many years, and not having any musical talent of her own, Angie considered herself a professional listener. It was something she

treasured – the natural and raw talent, the emotion poured into a creation with the hope it would be the next big radio hit.

Dinner had been buffet-style, and the instruments were stored away for the duration to avoid any messy gravy accidents. By now they'd be back out, resting in laps and against the wall as each person took a turn to show their stuff.

“How is the test going?” Angie heard the porch door slam as Veronica put some space between herself and the music. She was easily ten years older than Jamie, closing in on forty, tall and voluptuous with brilliant red hair. An earth mother, creative artist to the core. She could cook, she could paint, she played a mean banjo. And she could fix a carburetor, if necessary. She was Angie's idol.

“We're good – passed the first part, at least. How's the party?” Tonight's party would be typical Jamie and Veronica, meaning it would be all over the place. Many people Angie knew, some music industry folk she liked and many she'd rather not have seen. But there was always the random element as well – Veronica had a knack for collecting new friends. Her most recent addition was a young guy she'd met at the convenience store when she'd gone out one night to buy cigarettes. Chance had just gotten off a bus from Ohio and knew no one in Nashville. He was now boarding in Veronica's sister's basement. That was just Veronica's way.

“Oh, it's fine. Russell's had too much and is out trying to find a cow to tip in the pasture. You know how it goes. Did you hear about the Vandy student? Are you going to help in that search? If Shalako passes his test, can he help, too?” The music had faded and Angie could hear the swish of grass as Veronica walked towards the pasture to check on Russell, who had probably passed out by this time.

“No – we don't get called in if it's something involving a criminal. I think some of our human remains detection dogs have helped them look for bodies during investigations, and sometimes we get called to help find a runaway kid. Stuff where they are searching some specific piece of land – that's all I've been involved in. I wouldn't want to put Shalako at risk – if some whacko is crazy enough to take a girl out of her own apartment in the dead of night...well, that's not something I want a piece of. Besides, Shalako is only an air scenting dog – he can find people in the wilderness, when there aren't any other people around. I'm working on him so that eventually he'll be able to smell the difference between two or more people in the wilderness, and know which one is his victim. They call that being scent discriminatory. But he's not that good at that yet. But he's learning fast. Maybe one day.” Angie didn't want to bring the party down, but most abductions didn't seem to have a happy ending. Maybe the girl had just run away.

Silence stretched for a minute, the only sound over the phone was the crunching of grass as Veronica checked the field for a snoring Russell. It was a regular occurrence in their wacky little world. Jamie and Veronica lived in the main farm house on the property, and Angie had a smaller house across the driveway, tucked in between the main house and

the back fields. She loved it because it gave her both privacy and immediate access to a social life, albeit a slightly offbeat one.

“Well, tell Jamie I said congratulations. I’m sorry I’m missing the party.” Angie’s voice was wistful. Tomorrow, she told herself. It’d be over, one way or the other.

“Good luck tomorrow. Jamie said to tell you he knows you guys can do it.” Both Jamie and Veronica had served as Shalako’s training “victims” many times.

Angie hung up reluctantly. She glanced at the TV again, tempted to catch the national news and see if they had picked up Shannon’s story. No. She’d inventory her equipment instead. That way, first thing in the morning, she’d be ready to go. She wouldn’t have to worry that she had everything together. Yeah, right. Like she wouldn’t check 10 more times throughout the night anyway.

Just as she dumped her equipment out on her bed, Shalako, who had curled up in his open crate, lurched to his feet and barked sharply at the door. Angie’s eyes flew to the lock and fear flushed her system as she realized she’d been too preoccupied to slide the deadbolt. A peek through the hole revealed a solemn Ray. She swung open the door with a question in her eyes.

“What’s up? Has the team been called out on a real search?”

He stared at her silently for a moment. Ray was in his mid-fifties and in as good shape as anyone half his age. Boots polished, military style buzz cut in graying hair over crystalline blue eyes, uniform tailored precisely to his cut frame. He looked exactly the same every time she saw him, whether he was building a stretcher out of tree limbs, rappelling off a cliff, or carefully tending to his black and tan German shepherd Vesu. He had a restrained and deliberate air that inspired respect and confidence from almost everyone he met. She’d never seen him flustered, but stories of his temper were legendary. Dave had told her that Ray had once thrown a new team member up against a car because the guy had tried to discipline a dog with his fist. He’d then banned the guy from the team. Angie had loved him from the first day.

Right now, as usual, she couldn’t read the expression in his eyes. When he spoke, it was almost in a monotone.

“Get your gear. You have twenty minutes to get ready for the solo search portion of your certification. Meet me out in front of the lodge at 23:00 hours.” He turned and walked away.

“Hold on a minute! What are you talking about? It’s supposed to happen tomorrow. I can’t search at night. That would be impossible! What are you doing? Are you kidding me?” Her voice had risen several octaves since the beginning of her rant.

He turned back around and met her panic with those famously calm eyes. “There’s been a change of plans. You know what my philosophy is – if you and your dog can perform in difficult circumstances, then you’ll be able to perform any time, any where. There’s no rule in the book that says it has to be a daylight search. It’s time you learned to trust your dog. And think about it this way, if Shalako does what I know he can do, you’ll be in bed and done by midnight. I know you wouldn’t have slept well anyway. And you should feel more sorry for Dave – he’s already in position, and he won’t be able to move around like you will. I hope you brought warm clothing – it’s chilly out there.” And with that he was gone.

Angie slumped against the door and hid her face in her hands. This wasn’t happening. She was not so much afraid of the dark....well, maybe she was, a little. But a night search was much more complicated. It was harder to figure out where you were on the map, to see your compass and the path ahead with a flashlight, it just went on and on. She’d done some training at night, of course, but nothing by herself. This just sucked. But she still got moving, quickly changing into her uniform, layering up as best she could and grabbing both her dog and her pack. She made it with only a minute to spare. As she crunched towards Ray across the gravel drive, she could see his breath. It was going to be chilly. When she reached him, they stood in silence for a moment to let her eyes adjust to the dark. Thankfully, it was a cloudless night and there was a little light from a sliver of a moon. Actually, no thanks were due – Angie was willing to bet anything that Ray had carefully planned this from the beginning. The fact that the night was clear was not chance by any means. Nothing in Ray’s plan was ever left to chance. Not if he could help it, anyway.

“Before you dress Shalako for the search, let me give you the official instructions. You have one hour – there is victim hidden somewhere within 60 acres. Here is a topographical map of this area, and here are the boundaries of the 60 acres. That park access road will be your western boundary, and the top of that far hill line will be your eastern boundary.” He pointed at the two landmarks, one on either side of them and relatively visible while they were standing in an open space. “I’ll give you ten minutes to orient yourself with your compass. We’ll walk about one hundred yards away from the lodge, and you will begin your search. If you hit the river, that is the northern boundary of your area. You will have to figure out your search pattern on your own. Tune your radio to channel 5 – when you successfully find the victim, radio in the exact location of the find. And I mean using the map coordinates, don’t just try to tell me he’s near a big oak tree. Do you have any questions?” Ray smiled at her. “You’ll do just fine.”

Angie tried to slow her breathing down, afraid she would hyperventilate and faint. She nodded her head to answer him, and huddled over her map with a flashlight. It took all of the ten minutes for Angie to work the map, even though the building they stood in front of was clearly marked. Not a good start to the evening – she attributed it to nerves. But she was finally ready, so she turned on her radio, suited Shalako up, and they set off from the lodge. While they walked, Angie assessed the wind direction and tried to figure out a search plan. Her boundaries seemed pretty obvious – at least she didn't have to worry too much about wandering out of her area. She grabbed a bunch of grass and dropped it to judge the wind direction. There wasn't too much of a wind, but it seemed to be coming mostly from the north, maybe the northeast, but it was swirling a bit. That wasn't so bad, she decided, but something to keep an eye on. She could walk a large grid pattern moving towards the north, towards the river. She'd walk from the west boundary to the east boundary, letting Shalako roam out around and in front of her. That way, she would cover as much ground as possible and Shalako could intercept the scent as it blew in the wind. She just needed to remember to mark on her map every little indication he gave her that he was onto something. Dave had been out there awhile now, so his scent was probably pretty well fanned out away from him. The wind had already started playing games with it, so who knows what Shalako would find out there. It was her job to watch for every little head pop, every little change in Shalako's direction. Hopefully, if she read the weather right, she could actively help Shalako hone in on a direction.

They got to the edge of the lodge clearing, and Ray turned to her. "Good luck. The only advice I can give you right now is to remember to trust your dog. Now go."

Angie saluted him and headed off into the woods, letting Shalako off his leash and giving him the command to search. She'd attached a light stick to his harness to keep tabs on him. Before she knew it, they were deep in the wood, the clearing a distant, lighter shade of dark over her shoulder. The ghostly green glow was darting from side to side ahead of her, weaving flawlessly between trees, then disappearing behind unseen obstacles. He'd be gone long enough for her to worry, only to appear as a rush of air brushing her thigh. Despite the chill she was sweating, her breath ragged from a combination of nerves and adrenaline. When the flashlight was following Shalako's progress Angie would stumble as the roots jumped out at her, but when it was on the ground in front of her, she'd peer into the blackness in search of the flash of green. After only minutes she no longer could tell where she was on her map. And for her efforts to figure it out while still making forward progress she was rewarded by a strong lash of branch across her cheek, barely missing her eye. It was enough to double her over and her gasp brought Shalako back to her side.

This wasn't working. There was no way. When she looked back, she thought she could still see the barest hint of the clearing and the lodge. It would be so easy to reverse course. And no shame in it, really. Perhaps it was the concussion she'd suffered earlier this evening. Or Shalako was still thrown, maybe even injured as well, from his collision with her. It would be over. She'd tried. Better to call it off now than have something dangerous happen and become a victim herself – a sprained ankle would put her out of commission for weeks. And, yes, Appalachian Outdoor Sports may not be the most

important job ever, but it was her livelihood. And hourly employees don't get sick time. All the rationale was there, but it did nothing to move her feet back towards the light and warmth of her cabin. Shalako had laid down at her feet, breathing easy and patiently waiting for his handler to sort out her issues. The glow of his light stick illuminated the crumpled map where she'd dropped it.

Okay. One last try. The muted colors of the paper were comforting as she stood surrounded by the map's reality. Hope and determination evened out her breathing as she knelt by her dog's side and studied the map, spread wide on the ground. It was all here, she just needed to stop, get herself together, and figure out where she was right this instant. First things first. As she scrutinized the wiggly lines of nature versus the man-made straighter lines, then the little blocks that signified the buildings, the world around her seemed to take on shape- even in the darkness. And she knew she wasn't done yet.

She started off with renewed energy on a grid pattern that she hoped would cover all of the area efficiently. Shalako was excited and on the alert, dodging this way and that, sometimes stopping to sniff the hard ground, but thankfully staying closer at hand than before. She kept him on task by verbally encouraging him, all the while working her way farther and farther away from Ray and the starting point. They walked carefully, fanning the distance from the road on one side to the top of the hill on the other, and Shalako seemed to be in a working mood. He circled wide around her, nose in the air, looking for the hint of scent that would lead him to his victim. She kept her flashlight constantly arcing in front of her, getting the lay of the land and making sure to avoid any low hanging tree branches. After her initial panic she realized it wasn't that hard to see, with the moonlight and all. Angie began to relax as they fell into a familiar pattern. She kept one eye on her watch, and stopped to look at the topo map to gauge their progress. She also kept a sharp eye out for clues. She wasn't sure she'd find any in the dark, but you never know. Maybe she'd find a footprint or something. So far, nothing.

When she figured they were about halfway through the area, she stopped for a drink of water. She poured some down into a collapsible bowl for Shalako as well. Neither he nor his glow stick seemed to have lost any energy, but Angie was getting tired. She looked around her at the new vegetation and tried to think about scent theory. It was getting colder, which meant the scent would be moving down hill. Maybe she should walk to the base of the hill that was her boundary and walk along that for a while. He might have a better chance of picking up on something. Worth a shot, she decided. She was beginning to get nervous – could they have missed him? Shalako had shown no signs of anything at all. Where was Dave?

Trust your dog, she told herself. If Shalako had smelled anything, he would have let her know. Time to think outside the box. She hoisted the pack back onto her back and they set off again. This time, she veered off the grid and walked a bit up the side of the ridge. The hill was on the east side of her area. The wind had died down, but she thought it was still coming from the north. *We'll just walk about 100 yards along the top and see what happens*, she told herself. If he doesn't smell anything, or she didn't see anything, they'd go back down and continue with the grid she'd started on. Shalako bounded ahead of her

as she reached the mid-way point up to the peak. The wind was a little stronger up here, she noticed, but not that much – and it seemed to swirl around more. The trees were still pretty thick and the moonlight didn't always penetrate, so she couldn't see as well as she had hoped, but it was not yet early spring so a lot of the undergrowth had not yet developed. She trudged along, looking to her left back down the side, keeping an eye on her dog. He had picked up his pace a little, bounding further ahead of her. He kept veering more up to the very peak of the ridge, which was not what she'd expected at all. He finally paused just short of topping the hill. She jogged up to him to grab his collar and lead him back down to the base. Obviously, this was not a good idea. Sure enough, just as she got there, he reached the top of the hill and threatened to start down the other side, away from their designated area. As he crested, she could have sworn she saw his head pop up. *Did he just smell something?* She quickened her pace and called his name. What was he doing over there? They were officially outside her search area, so she needed to get him back on task.

He bounded back towards her, alert and excited, but didn't respond to her curt command to stop. He ranged further to her right, and she saw his head pop up again. He pivoted and sprinted forward again. He was definitely onto something. Finally! Dave must have accidentally wandered out of the pre-assigned search area – it would be just like him to do something like that. What an airhead. Shalako was pretty far ahead of her right now, almost outside of the flashlight's reach, and he was swerving back and forth quickly along the top of the ridge. She started to jog, hoping to be closer when he made the actual find. All of a sudden, Shalako swerved hard to the right and bounded out of view, down the other side of the hill. She broke into an all out run, forgetting the twenty five pounds on her back. They'd done it! His alert rang out loud and clear just as she reached the top of the slight ridge he'd disappeared over. Her flashlight and gaze scanned the woods as he continued to bark with an excited, high pitch. Something was wrong – his bark seemed to shift directions. She froze. *What the hell was that?* She started to sprint down the slope. Shalako was running away from her, and she got a glimpse of the outline of a man running in front of him. He's not supposed to run, she thought. The man turned and looked at her, framed in the bobbing light of her flashlight just for a millisecond, and it hit her that it wasn't Dave. Shalako was just about to catch up with some poor hiker. But at this time of night? Just when it couldn't get any stranger, Angie heard Shalako let out a guttural scream, obviously in distress.

At that moment, her foot caught on something and she pitched head over heels down the rest of the slope. A stifled scream escaped her, and map, compass and pencil went flying out of her hands. She felt like she rolled and slid forever, and when she finally came to a stop Shalako was back at her side, making sure she was all right. He wasn't used to his victims running from him, or his handler tumbling down a hill, so she figured he was pretty freaked out. And she was right. He was also moving with a pronounced limp. As she cautiously got to her feet and assessed the damage to her body, he paced back and forth nervously whimpering while favoring his left front leg. Forgetting her own discomfort, Angie grabbed his collar and ran the flashlight over Shalako's chest and legs. Was that blood? He'd injured himself somehow – a gash on his chest that was bleeding down his leg. She pulled her canine first aid kit out of her bag and did her best to stop the

bleeding. It was hard to tell how deep it was because of the matted fur, dirt and leaves. She cleaned it gently while Shalako whined softly. She looked around, knowing her certification was over. She had to get him some help. It didn't look too serious, but her partner was certainly in obvious pain. She'd have to carry him out.

She turned her attention to her own situation. Angie felt okay, besides a scraped knee under her pants and a boatload of leaves and branches in her hair. She just hoped there hadn't been too many witnesses to her ungraceful descent of the hill. Perhaps her mystery hiker was long gone, and for once she hoped she was nowhere close to Dave. He'd never let her live this down.

"It's okay" she comforted Shalako, reaching into her pack to get the squeaky bunny. He hadn't found Dave, but he had found a person, and so he needed to be rewarded. Shalako dropped the bunny and whined at her, limping away and looking around.

She slowly turned her flashlight in a circle, trying to figure out what to do next to get him out of the woods as quickly as possible. She saw something out of the corner of her eye, a flash of blue, yellow, and white on the ground. Had she disturbed a poacher's campsite or something? Shalako was still agitated, pacing unevenly around in front of her, ducking towards the bundle and then away. She took a step forward and then forgot everything else around her. My god, was that hair? She paused and then threw her pack on the ground and sprinted forward. It wasn't a bundle of clothes. It was human. She was on her side, her back towards Angie, hand flung out unnaturally behind her. Outstretched arm and shoulder pale against the dirt, filthy t-shirt and Snoopy patterned flannel pants incongruous in the chilly air. Shit shit shit shit echoed in Angie's mind. Shalako had started to bark again, circling around her as she knelt over the body. She reached for the neck and a squeaky gasp escaped her lips as she realized that the dark, tacky substance covering the girl wasn't mud. No pulse, eyes wide open and some sort of gag spilling out of her mouth. She still felt warm. In a fractured moment Angie realized there was blood everywhere. Everywhere.