

# Scent *of* *the* Missing

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LOVE AND PARTNERSHIP WITH A  
SEARCH-AND-RESCUE DOG

Susannah Charleson



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# Table of Contents

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[Title Page](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[AUTHOR'S NOTE](#)

[1. GONE](#)

[2. DOG FOR THE JOB](#)

[3. INTO THE WIND](#)

[4. PUZZLE HAS LANDED](#)

[5. ALL THE WRONG THINGS](#)

[6. FIRST LESSONS](#)

[7. TRUST FALL](#)

[8. SIX DAYS DOWN](#)

[9. HOUSEBREAKING](#)

[10. SOMEONE ELSE'S STORM](#)

[11. RUNNING WITH THE BIG DOGS](#)

[12. THE FAMILY STORY](#)

[13. THE SEARCH YOU'RE CALLED OUT TO](#)

[14. HOME AND HEARTH](#)

[PHOTOS](#)

[15. THIS BOY HERE](#)

[16. FEAR STAGES](#)

[17. SNAKE-PROOFING](#)

[18. A HANDLER'S GUIDE TO RISK MANAGEMENT](#)

[19. SHOW AND TELL](#)

[20. THE WILDERNESS TEST](#)

[21. CLEAR BUILDING](#)

[22. TRUST THE DOG](#)

[23. COLUMBIA](#)

[24. NO BAD NEWS](#)

[25. JIMMY](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

[ACKNOWLEDGMENTS](#)

[BIBLIOGRAPHY](#)

[Sample Chapter from THE POSSIBILITY DOGS](#)

[Buy the Book](#)

[About the Author](#)

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*For Ellen Sanchez, who always believed, and  
brought a thousand cups of tea to prove it.*

*For Puzzle. Good dog. Find more.*

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

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*Scent of the Missing* is a memoir of my experiences as a field assistant and young search-and-rescue canine handler. Unless otherwise attributed, the perspectives and opinions expressed here are my own and do not necessarily reflect those of teammates and colleagues in the field.

Though this book is a nonfiction account of working search-and-rescue, compassion for the affected families and respect for their privacy have directed me to change names, locations, and identifying circumstances surrounding the searches related here. Who, where, and when are frankly altered; what, why, and how are as straightforward as one person's perspective can make them.

The dogs are all real. You can hold up a biscuit and call them by name.

# 1. GONE

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IN THE LONG LIGHT of early morning, Hunter circles what remains of a burned house, his nose low and brow furrowed. The night's thick air has begun to lift, and the German Shepherd's movement catches the emerging sun. He is a shining thing against the black of scorched brick, burned timber, and a nearby tree charred leafless. Hunter inspects the tree: half-fallen, tilting south away from where the fire was, its birds long gone. Quiet here. I can hear his footpads in the wizened grass, the occasional scrape of his nails across debris. The dog moves along the rubble in his characteristic half-crouch, intense and communicative, while his handler, Max, watches.

Hunter rounds the house twice, crosses cautiously through a clear space in the burned pile, and returns to Max with a huff of finality. *Nothing*, he seems to say. Hunter is not young. There are little flecks of gray about his dark eyes and muzzle, and his body has begun to fail his willing heart, but he knows his job, and he is a proud boy doing it. He leans into his handler and huffs again. Max rubs his ears and turns away.

"She's not in the house," I murmur into the radio, where a colleague and a sheriff's deputy wait for word from us.

"Let's go," says Max to Hunter.

We move on, our tracks dark across the ash, Hunter leading us forward into a field that lies behind the house. Here we have to work a little harder across the uneven terrain. Max, a career firefighter used to unstable spaces, manages the unseen critter holes and slick grass better than I do. Hunter cleaves an easy path. Our passage disturbs the field mice, which move in such a body the ground itself appears to shiver.

Wide sweeps across the field, back and forth across the wind, Hunter and Max and I (the assistant trail) continuing to search for some sign of the missing girl. Hunter is an experienced search dog with years of disaster work and many single-victim searches behind him. He moves confidently but not heedlessly, and at the base of a low ridge crowned by a stand of trees, he pauses, head up a long moment, mouth open. His panting stops.

Max stops, watches. I stand where I last stepped.

And then Hunter is off, scrambling up the ridge with us behind him, crashing through the trees. We hear a surprised shout, and scuffling, and when we get to where he is, we see two men stumble away from the dog. One is yelping a little, has barked his shin on a battered dinette chair he's tripped over. The other hauls him forward by the elbow, and they disappear into the surrounding brush.

A third man has more difficulty. He is elderly and not as fast. He has been lying on a bare set of box springs set flat beneath the canopy of trees, and when he rises the worn cloth of his trousers catches on the coils. We hear rending fabric as he jerks free. He runs in a different direction from the other two—*not their companion*, I think—and a few yards away he stops and turns to peek through the scrub at us, as though aware the dog is not fierce and we aren't in pursuit.

Our search has disturbed a small tent city, and as we work our way through the reclaimed box springs and three-legged coffee tables and mouse-eaten recliners that have become a sort of home for its inhabitants, the third man watches our progress from the edge of the brush. This is a well-lived space, but there is nothing of the missing girl here. Charged on this search to find any human scent in the area, living or dead, Hunter has done what he is supposed to do. But he watches our response. From where I stand, it is clear Hunter knows what we've found is not what we seek, and that what we seek isn't here. He gazes at Max, reading him, his eyebrows working, stands poised for the "Find more" command.

"Sector clear," I say into the radio after a signal from Max. I mention the tent city and its

inhabitants and learn it is not a surprise.

“Good boy,” says Max. Hunter’s stance relaxes.

As we move away, the third man gains confidence. He steps a little forward, watching Hunter go. He is barefoot and shirtless. “Dog, dog, dog,” he says voicelessly, as though he shapes the word but cannot make the sound of it. “Dog,” he rasps again, and smiles wide, and claps his hands.

Saturday night in a strange town five hundred miles from home. I am sitting in a bar clearly tacked on to our motel as an afterthought. The clientele here are jammed against one another in the gloom, all elbows and ball caps bent down to their drinks—more tired than social. At the nearby pool table, a man makes his shot, trash talks his opponent, and turns to order another beer without having to take more than four steps to get it. This looks like standard procedure. The empty bottles stack up on a nearby shelf that droops from screws half pulled out of the wall. Two men dominate the table while others watch. The shots get a little wild, the trash talk sloppier.

A half-hour ago, when I walked in with a handful of teammates, every head in the bar briefly turned to regard us, then turned away in perfect synchronization, their eyes meeting and their heads bobbing nod. We are strangers and out of uniform, but they know who we are and why we are here, and besides, they’ve seen a lot of strangers lately. Now, at the end of the second week of search for a missing local girl, they leave us alone. We find a table, plop down without discussion, and a waitress comes out to take our orders. She calls several of us “honey” and presses a hand to the shoulder of one of us as she turns away.

Either the town hasn’t passed a smoking ordinance, or here at the city limits this place has conveniently ignored the law. We sit beneath a stratus layer of cigarette smoke that curls above us like an atmosphere of drowsy snakes, tinged blue and red and green by the neon signs over the bar. Beside the door, I see a flyer for the missing girl. Her face hovers beneath the smoke. She appears uneasy even in this photograph taken years ago, her smile tentative and her blond, feathered bangs sprayed close as a helmet, her dark eyes tight at the edges, like this picture was something to be survived.

I have looked at her face all day. On telephone poles, in the hands of local volunteers, over the shoulder of a big-city newscaster at noon, six, and ten o’clock. She is the ongoing local headline. She’s the girl no one really knew before her disappearance, and now she’s the girl eager eyewitnesses claim to have known all their lives. It’s hard to tell what’s real and what isn’t, but for the most part that’s not our job. We go where law enforcement directs us. We run behind search dogs who will tell us their own truths in any given area: *never here, was here, hers, not hers, blood, hair, bone, here, here, here.*

We humans aren’t talking about the search, our first day at work in this town. Inappropriate discussion in a public place, and we are exhausted with it anyway. Though today’s bystanders seemed to think we could take our dogs to Main Street and race them outward across all points of the compass—first dog to the victim wins—canine search-and-rescue doesn’t work that way. Assigned to locations chosen by law enforcement, we work methodically, dividing a region into sectors to be searched by individual dog-and-handler teams. It’s a meticulous process, but trained dogs can quickly clear a large area it would take humans days to definitively search.

Even so, we could be here for weeks. We already feel the trackless absence of this girl. Her hometown is small, but its outlying population is widespread, and there are places to hide a living woman or the remains of a dead one that cross lines into other states. Today we were sent to clear more “hot spots”—places where bodies have been dumped before. Shrouded, ugly areas they were too scarred from previous events, but not this girl, this time. All day the dogs have been telling us: *Not here. Not here. Not here.*

I look at her photograph again. A big guy shifting on his stool blocks the ambient light from the ba

causing the girl's face to purple beneath the neon and the whites of her eyes to swallow the irises. Her gaze no longer connects. It's a condition that was true of her in life, some say. She has a history of scuttling head down, of sitting at the back of the class, never speaking unless spoken to, and even then as briefly as possible. She sounds uncertain on her voicemail greeting, enunciating her name with a rising inflection that suggests she isn't quite sure of it.

We hear fragments. The cumulative description adds up to a girl who began inching away from this town six years earlier, who saved her allowance and bought a junky car simply to have her first job at a truck stop in another town fifteen miles up the road, who saved her paychecks to buy a used laptop, and who had begun re-creating herself in variations all across the Web. *No judgment*, says a neighbor. *An accident waiting to happen*, says one interviewee. Authorities suggest she might be a runaway if it weren't for the methodical, calculated nature of her young choices. She might be a runaway if it weren't for her purse, cell phone, keys, car, and laptop left behind at her grandmother's house, the last place she was seen alive.

We're told she has a tattoo, inked by a trucker where she worked: a butterfly with the letter *K* on her left wrist. The tattoo is in honor of an online friend, Katie, who had slashed her own wrists in a successful suicide—or so it was rumored, until Katie returned to a chat room a month later with a new location, new name, new boyfriend, holding up her woundless wrists for photographs, laughing at the duped online friends who thought they knew her, who had responded to her loss with depression, Paxil, and new tattoos in her honor. April Fools, all.

*Did our girl admire her, forgive her? I wonder. Is this a copycat drama?*

I turn away from her photograph. She's not my daughter, but I feel a mother's impulse to push the bangs from her eyes, the rescuer's urge to put two fingertips to her carotid to check for a pulse.

We're a quiet group, tight and preoccupied. Still wired from the day's search, we lean forward over our food, weight on the balls of our feet with our heels lifted, as though we'll push up at any moment to go back to work. Unlikely. We're stood down for the night and have an early call in the morning. I always takes a while to let go enough to sleep, especially as a search presses forward over days and investigators' verbs begin to change from *she is* to *she was*. That little shift in tense is enough to keep us awake all night, revisiting the day's barns, ravines, burned houses, tent cities, and trailer parks, triple-checking ourselves against the signals from the dogs. To say this girl haunts us is to overdramatize. But we all mull choices made in the field long after we should be sleeping. I stab at my coleslaw and wonder when one of us will finally relax into the back of a chair.

In time, Terry, a canine handler, leans over to say to me, "Hey. I hear you're going to work a dog." The others look up.

"Yes," I say. The word feels huge as a wedding vow.

I've been on the search-and-rescue (SAR) team for a while now, running beside certified dogs and their handlers, working as a field assistant responsible for navigation, radio communication, medical assessment, and other pragmatics of a working canine search team. After three years, I'm senior enough to have earned the next open slot to train and run beside a search dog. I am excited about this but a little nervous too. Having run with more than a dozen breeds and their handlers, having searched night into day for the living, and having knelt over the dead, I'm aware how serious a proposition bringing a new dog to the team is. Working search is not a hobby or a Sunday pastime.

"What breed you thinking of running?" he asks. He handles a Border Collie, a high-drive, obsessive-compulsive boy who is good all around, but particularly good searching on water.

"I'm not sure. Maybe a Border Collie. Maybe an Aussie. Or maybe a Gol..."

"You give any thought to a Golden Retriever?"

I nod, and he tells me about his former Golden, Casey, a good dog with a lot of smarts and a lot of soul and a nose that never stopped. A good dog that died, too soon, of cancer. Though my colleague i

not one who generally talks at length, his description is detailed. I see the shape of his Golden boy emerge. ~~A sturdy fellow with a nice face and a wide grin—funny, perceptive, and compassionate.~~ My teammate speaks, and his voice constricts. This dog has been dead for more than five years. Terry's love for the animal had been too raw at the time he began training his own search canine, and he couldn't go with a Golden. Listening to him now, I'm aware it's an open wound. Toughened by years as a homicide detective, he is still not in shape to have another Golden, he says, but he's safe enough recommending one to me.

And the breed has much to recommend it for search work: drive, stability, commitment to working with a human, congeniality, and nose. I already have other dogs and cats, and for reasons of amicability at home, as well, I'm also drawn to the idea of a Golden.

We speak of other search-and-rescue Golden Retrievers: iconic, much-photographed Riley traveling aloft in the Stokes basket across the debris of the World Trade Center and diligent Aspen supporting her exhausted handler as he presses his face to her back following a search of the collapsed Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. This fine breed figures in virtually every aspect of search. Snow dogs, bomb dogs, drug dogs, arson dogs too.

"Got to love a retriever," says Johnny, a Lab man himself, and then he chuckles. "But, girl, no matter what kind of puppy, there's gonna be some housebreaking and chewed shoes in your future."

"And sleepless nights," says Ellen.

"And *poop*," adds Terry wryly, a cautionary finger up. "These high-drive dogs. All that adrenaline. When a puppy starts working, you just wouldn't *believe* the poo..."

I push away my coleslaw.

Leaning back in their chairs at last, the whole group seems pleased about my coming duress. They exchange young SAR dog stories, not one of them featuring angelic puppies poised for greatness. There's disaster in every punch line—"the neighbor's TV made him howl"... "ate right through the drywall"... and "then her *parrot* learned to bark." I look at the team trainer dubiously.

"This is good," says Fleta, rubbing her forehead. "A new pup-in-training always gives the whole team a boost." Her eyes are tired, but she grins as she lifts her glass in salute.

On any given day in America, there are as many as one hundred thousand active missing persons cases. A large percentage of these cases go unresolved. At the same time, the recovered and unidentified remains of some forty thousand people are held by medical examiners across the country. As a search-and-rescue worker in the field, I am caught by those numbers—they equal the population of a small city. I'm aware that we run dogs in the thin air between possibility of life and probability of death, and that while we search for a single girl whose weathered flyers have already begun to fade, there are thousands of others actively being searched. Or not. Knowing how many people are involved on the search for this young woman, I cannot imagine the number of investigators, grid walkers, pilots, ATVs, equestrian units, dog teams, and forensic experts of every kind needed to resolve all the others. I suspect geography, marginalization, and limited resources mean quite a few of the missing are short-term questions that go unanswered—or are never raised at all.

Our small-town girl disappeared in a slow news period. I wonder how much time she's got before funds run out, new local troubles arise, and she is crowded from the docket to take her place in local lore. The margin between SEARCH CONTINUES FOR MISSING TEEN and UNIDENTIFIED REMAINS UNCOVERED IN STATE PARK ten years from now seems narrow.

Time and numbers make me urgent. I cannot train my new dog too soon.

Next morning's light is hard as a slap. The community has rallied beneath a red, white, and blue striped tent donated by a used car dealership half the state away. The structure is shabby; its attached

bunting is worn. The top line sags. A good wind could be a problem here, but the morning is windless.

At this early hour, the sun shines in at a slant, but it is already too warm inside the tent. Two hundred or so volunteers jockey for position behind the darker canvas of the wide blue stripes. We suck down donated orange juice or strong coffee or both—an unwise choice. The port-a-potties have not yet arrived, and today's search has staged in the middle of nowhere, from a plain so flat that any thought of a quick whip around a bush to pee should assume an audience, both local and televised. A caravan of mobile units from TV stations miles away has also arrived. Their antennae and cranes have already begun to extend.

We hear more cars exit the road and crunch across the gravel and brush. Doors slam, and a voice from near the tent flap says that the sheriff's here with the parents, and we should be starting soon. I don't think so. I read a similar doubt on the faces of my teammates. *Hurry up and wait* is the case more often than not on large searches, and this one, with its ambiguous geography and its swelling ranks of volunteers, has become a large search. We were told to be on-scene at 7:00 A.M., and we've been here ninety minutes. I think if we deploy by 9:30, we'll be lucky.

"I'm going to check on the dogs," says Terry, four bottles of water in the crook of his elbow. The dogs are crated behind the shade of our cars with Ellen, a field assistant, in attendance. I can see them through the tent flap. They look a whole lot more comfortable than we do.

Aware they are on-scene to work, the dogs are alert. Collie Saber, German Shepherd Hunter, Border Collie Hoss, and Buster, a Lab. They scrutinize all newcomers, nostrils knitting and ears perked forward, their expressions speculative. I wonder how they sort passersby: *old guy with a kidney problem...nice lady who ate bacon for breakfast, come here, nice lady...this guy's got two dogs—one of them, oh, one of them's in heat!...hey, that kid dropped McMuffin on his pants*. Terry's approach makes them turn and grin. Their wagging tails *bang-bang-bang* against the bars of their crates.

Here in the tent, a community group has made T-shirts for its members, purple T-shirts bearing several photos of the missing girl. WE'LL FIND YOU promise the shirts on the front. WE LOVE YOU they say on the back. Several participants have their video cameras out to record today's events. The sheriff walks in with two deputies and the missing girl's parents, and the group falls silent. A man whips his Tilley hat off. His friend with a digital camera continues to shoot: sheriff, mom and dad, TV reporter, crowd. A deputy's leaden gaze stops her. I hear the little *scree* of it winding down. She puts the camera in her purse.

The sheriff's briefing tells us little that gossip hasn't already introduced. Yesterday's search found nothing relevant to the missing girl. But, we are reminded, every area cleared contributes something toward a final answer. The sheriff's baritone is edged with weariness, ragged on its ending syllables, yet he speaks well. His words are clear and urgent. The community group will be divided into four units which will work, geographically, across today's new areas. We should expect hardship, he says. These places are ugly and brushy and filled with debris from illegal dumping. High boots are recommended. There will be broken glass. There could be snakes. A woman in front of me, wearing shorts, sandals, and a baby in a papoose on her back, looks at her husband. He looks pointedly at her feet, and she sets her jaw and turns away.

The sheriff pulls the girl's parents forward. Though the woman appears shattered with fatigue while her husband's face is tight and reserved, it is his voice that gives way as he thanks the crowd. "Find our girl," says his wife in his wordlessness. She guides him away from the television camera, but he turns and gives the lens a long look in passing.

"All right," says the sheriff. "We've got no better reason to be here." The crowd stirs beneath the tent, convicted again. As two deputies step forward to divide the ground-search volunteers, I feel a tug on my arm. "We're going," mouths Johnny. He jerks his head in the direction of another officer discreetly leading us out of the tent and away from the crowd.

As we gather around the deputy and the dogs press their noses to the crate bars to smell him, he opens a map on the hood of a truck and shows us where we're headed. "The word is this may be it," he says. "We think she's here." He points to a spot and then makes a wide circle with a forefinger.

"Why here?" asks Terry. The retired detective in him is never far away.

The deputy shrugs. "Anonymous tip." He stares at the map a long moment. "That's all we've got."

The dogs quiver and circle and pee as we release them from their crates. A few bark excitedly as we load them into the trucks, engines and air conditioners on. Safe now in transport crates, they are ready to go. I can hear them winding themselves up behind the glass, scuffling and muttering, that signature dog sound that's more grumble than growl.

Three dogs work separate sections of the area we've deployed to, fifty acres of patchy terrain, dried creek bed, and dumped appliances. A variable wind has risen, strong enough to make a little thunder over our ears, but born of ground radiation, it offers no relief from heat. The dogs will use the wind, though. Turning east, north, then west, through binoculars I watch them sweep their individual sectors, heads up and tails visible above the bending grass, handlers following yards behind.

Collie Saber moves across the scrub at a steady trot, despite his heavy coat and the day's temperature. I hardly need binoculars. He is easy to see from a distance, a tricolored boy flashing against the dun terrain. Fleta follows, watching him thoughtfully, with Ellen in trail behind them both taking notes. The scruffy field is flat. Saber's wide sweeps are clean and unbroken. At the end of the sector, they pause. The Collie looks back to Fleta and turns with a movement very like a shrug of his great ruff—an *all clear* that's readable even from where I stand. I see Fleta turn and shake her head to Ellen. A moment later, Ellen's voice crackles across the radio that they're coming in.

Max and Hunter are winding their way through a clutch of small trees that cling to the edge of a rainwater runoff gully. I watch the German Shepherd's great dark ears working independently as he penetrates the sector, as though there is much to hear skittering in the grass. A nervous prairie bird flushes yards away from where they walk, and both Hunter's ears come forward so rapidly that the light spots within them seem to blink like eyes. He doesn't turn for the bird, however, continuing on his course, nose thrust forward. He leads Max through the trees and they disappear behind them, visible only as an occasional twitch and flash of Max's red shirt as they work the rest of the sector.

Trained to alert differently on the living and the dead, the dogs' demeanor across the area is consistent. No pause, no head pop, no sudden, energized movement, no bark. Their passage stirs rabbits and shivers a few snakes from the brush, but the dogs communicate their disinterest. They all seem to agree that nothing's here.

The deputy watches quietly. "I hunt with a Lab," he says, looking out to Johnny and Buster. "Great dogs. Can't stop them."

Fleta has already returned with Saber. Max comes in with Hunter, shaking his head. Hunter takes a drink of water as fast as Max pours it and flops down with a sigh. A few minutes later Johnny returns with Buster. "Nothing," he says. "Except a bunch of baby rabbits in a washing machine out there."

"Aw," says Ellen. "Bunnies. How many?"

"Dunno," Johnny replies. "Enough to be breakfast, lunch, and dinner for the snakes."

"God." Ellen folds her arms across her chest and shakes her head. Ellen's worked ranches, but she's ready for any kind of good word here.

The deputy says, "Thing is..."

We look at him. His cell phone buzzes, and he walks away, muttering into it, one hand pressed to the opposite ear to block the wind.

A new search area, and we are moving fast. Ground searchers have found a location where the scent of death is strong, and third-hand word to the deputy by cell phone suggests the presence of possible

evidence too. Now a potential crime scene, the area has been cleared, and the sheriff waits for the dogs. ~~We'll use a different approach: one way in, one way out—a cautious trail rather than a wide sweep—to confirm or deny what's been found.~~

We park at the base of a shallow rise crisscrossed with bike trails and more dumped appliances, a whole host of abandoned cars. Our deputy gives a little jerk of his head as we look upward, waiting for clearance to deploy.

“Kids park here,” he says.

I think of sex in this tangled, airless scrub and feel old. “Really?” I ask, doubtfully.

“The stars are nice,” he replies. A little twist of his mouth suggests he knows this from experience and I wonder if he's busted kids here or was once one of them himself.

His cell phone buzzes again. After a few moments he turns to us. “Thing is,” he says, “there's a smell in a locked car, and an object not far away that may have been a weapon, and fresh clothes in the mud. Because this might be a crime scene—if not this one, then another one—we don't want you to track the whole area, but we'd like you to bring the dogs and see what they think about the car.”

Fleta and Saber, Max and Hunter, Ellen and I follow the deputy up the thin trail to the top of the rise. A distance away, perhaps two football fields long, I can see a group of volunteer searchers watching us, their purple shirts dark as a bruise against the buff-colored ground. I hear the huddle of voices when the breeze shifts and I am downwind. At the top of the rise, the sheriff and two deputies are still and expectant. They turn to lead us carefully to the car in question, a battered blue '72 Impala. Just beyond it, a stainless butcher knife lies in the dirt. The knife is clean and bright. Next to the Impala, a pair of crumpled blue jeans rest in such a way that it appears someone dropped his pants right there and stepped out of them. The jeans remain in that position, the legs stacked, the fly open, the waist upward and wide. A thread of dust marks a few denim folds that I can see, but it doesn't appear to me that the jeans have been here long.

Ellen and I are taking notes as first Saber, then Hunter slowly circle the car. Both are experienced cadaver dogs, and though they sniff every crevice, neither gives a flicker of interest. Fleta shakes her head, and minutes later, Max does too.

“No,” says Max. “The dogs say no.”

The sheriff gestures us all closer forward, and the fug of decomposition is palpable. “Have any of you ever smelled a dead body?” he asks. Fleta, Max, and I nod and step nearer, and without thinking about it, we simultaneously put our noses just above the trunk. The air is thick and foul.

“This doesn't smell right,” I murmur just as Fleta also shakes her head. I always have difficulty explaining it, but to me dead human smells different from squirrel, rat, or possum on the side of the road. Not just more scent—human death seems specific and particular. I don't know the why behind the chemistry. All that shampoo, maybe, or trans fat or antiperspirant, or maybe we're all pickled in Coca-Cola, like the urban legend says.

“Something's dead in here,” says Fleta, “but I don't think it's human.”

Max guides Hunter forward again, watching. “Where's the dead thing, Hunter?” he says. Off-command to find human scent, Hunter circles the car in the way of any curious dog, stopping warily and putting his nose to the back left wheel well. Max kneels into the area, then drops his head. “Got it,” he says, his voice sad. “It's a dog.”

We all bend down, and there, caught above the back axle, we can see a dog's paws and its limp head dangling. A medium-size mixed breed, brown fur ticked with black. The flesh of its mouth is pulled back from the teeth; the eyes are muddy and glazed. The pads are intact but slightly shriveled, and I can see a small white stone between two of them. This dog was either hit by the car or crawled up there to die. An uncomforted end. I hear the lazy drone of flies.

“Dead for a while,” says Max.

“Well, okay,” says the sheriff. He gets up stiffly. Though he is sunburned, the flesh beneath his eyes is gray.

“Got anywhere else for the dogs to search?” asks the deputy.

The sheriff shakes his head. “Don’t have anywhere else for anybody.” Then he adds, “This search is going to be a long one. Guess you folks can go home. We’ll call you back if we get something for the dogs.”

We stand a moment. He gazes along the rise to the motionless group of volunteers. Below us, another vehicle has pulled up and parked. The car doors slam, *thunk*, and—slower—*thunk*. The sheriff turns.

“Right,” he says. “I’ll go tell the parents.”

He walks down the path, and they walk up toward him. As they near, I watch the sheriff stand a little straighter. The father, too, lifts his head and squares his shoulders and pulls his wife to his hip as they climb. And in that moment before they connect, on day thirteen of a search for a missing local girl, I wonder how they can bear the unknowing, what these parents most wish for—words that leave the door open or words that press the door closed.

Our cars are loaded for the long drive home, and the dogs are having a last romp in a small park along a stream. Two of the local volunteers on today’s search stand with us beneath the shade of a pecan tree. One is about to drive back to her college for summer classes. The other has had a quick shower and will head another direction to her restaurant shift miles away.

One asks what we think the dogs know about this search. Do they feel what we feel? Does the search continue to trouble them, as we humans are troubled?

Fleta shakes her head, pointing out that from the dogs’ perspectives, this search was successful. They were asked to do a job: *find the missing girl or indicate definitively she’s not here*, and they did. Apart from three vagrants in a tent city, no one living or dead was there to be found. And after the day’s sectors were done, volunteers hid so the dogs could find them, a quick and upbeat conclusion to a hard workday, a game that fools no one but keeps motivation high. These dogs are all praise-hounds. They played along, finding and grinning and capering.

No, Fleta suggests. There are exceptions, but usually the dogs let go of a day’s search better than we do. We trust them to do their jobs, and they trust us to tell them they have done it well. And when we tell them, they believe us.

I watch them play. Common goals aside, these dogs are complete individuals in the field. I have searched beside Hunter’s intensity, Saber’s calm authority, and Buster’s bounding accuracy. Even this evening’s pleasure they pursue in different ways. The German Shepherd noses for critters in the brush while the Lab snaps at minnows in shallow water, trying to catch them. We tease him, and Buster raises his head with muzzle dripping, looking fusty and bemused, but he grins at the sound of his name and tries for fish again. The beautiful Collie, Saber—much-admired and he knows it—rolls ungracefully in the grass, groaning *unnh-unnnh-unnhhhhh-mmmmmmm*. His white ruff is streaked with green when he gets up, and his coat splays every which way. He is thoroughly happy to be such a mess. “Brickhead,” says Fleta, hugging him as he nuzzles her ear. “Doofus.”

The Border Collie brings every one of us his ball. Hoss is a dog of great charm and is completely tone-deaf to rejection. It’s time to leave, but he is persuasive. We throw and throw and throw again. “Fetch therapy” we call it, and it works. The local volunteers leave laughing, Hoss still petitioning them with his ball in his mouth all the way to their cars.

As we head out, I wonder what my own dog will bring to the work, to the team, and to me. I like the thought of a long drive home with a Golden snoring belly-up in the back of the car: a good dog who has worked well. A partner. A friend. After a search like this one, that companionship must take away

a little of the ache.

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## 2. DOG FOR THE JOB

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IT'S 102 DEGREES when I step out of the airport in Midland, Texas, but my hands are cold. I've got a dog carrier, a collar and leash, and a canine SAR training vest. I'm wearing my team ID and a stunned expression I can describe only now as *deer in the headlights*.

After almost a year of research, breeder queries, and preemptive puppy-proofing at the house, I am a half-hour away from the Golden Retriever that will be my partner. Today there's little evidence of all the meticulous preparation: I look down and realize I'm wearing different-colored socks and that my blind scramble to get from home to the airport at dawn, I also brought a new dog toy, size-appropriate for a Great Dane, a stuffed red lobster with "Cape Cod" embroidered on the claw. I don't remember picking it up at the house. I don't remember pushing it through security. I think the lobster is probably bigger than the puppy is.

"Where's the pet?" asks a cabdriver who sees me standing alone, cradling the empty carrier and the toy.

"I'm going to be having some puppy!" I babble, waving the lobster as if to clarify. The driver shakes his head and backs away from me, clearly figuring I'm not all there.

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For so visible a presence in the public consciousness, the Golden Retriever is not an ancient breed. Though its early history is sometimes debated and there are folk stories of Russian dogs being the sire and dam of the first pups that would be Goldens, the Golden Retriever Club of America credits the Golden's origins to Sir Dudley Majoribanks, Lord Tweedmouth, who acquired the single yellow pup in a litter of black wavy-coated retrievers in Brighton, England, in the early 1870s. Lord Tweedmouth named the yellow dog "Nous" and added him to his pack of sporting retrievers at Guisachan House in the Highlands of Scotland, later breeding him with a liver-colored female Tweed Water Spaniel named "Belle." That mating yielded several yellow pups that would become foundation dogs for the Golden Retriever breed. "Crocus," a Nous and Belle pup, appears in photographs to bear a striking resemblance to the contemporary Golden. Golden Retrievers began appearing in British dog shows in the Retriever-Wavy or Flat-Coated category in the early 1900s, but the American Kennel Club did not recognize the breed until 1932. Goldens were a rare breed at the time.

Like their forebears, modern Goldens are intelligent dogs that are eager to partner humans in a variety of ways. Though bred to retrieve, they can also be talented, disciplined athletes in the agility ring and obedience trials. Many excel in tracking and at other scent-associated tasks. The AKC literature confirms they are loyal, loving companions. The breed's natural inclinations are all potential positives in the search field. I'd heard the general buzz for years, but during months of research prior to locating my puppy, it was good to see a solid reputation surface.

Now the Golden Retriever consistently places in the top ten most popular dogs in America—in part due to the word-of-mouth PR, perhaps in great part due to all the media exposure—a popularity that may contribute to the breed's serious problems. And there are some. In the open market, where supply meets demand, some smell the money to be made in Goldens, and commercial breeding can be haphazard. In the long months prior to finding my partner, I researched genealogies and read up on the breed's vulnerabilities, among them possible hip issues, heart issues, eye problems—and cancer, a common killer of Goldens, young and old. Hemangiosarcoma and lymphosarcoma: twin specters that shadow thousands of heartbroken posts on the Internet, lowering the Golden's average lifespan to ten and a half years. Deaths at age four or five are not uncommon. As a member of several online Golden Retriever forums, I read hard news from online friends and went to sleep some nights saddened by vicarious loss.

There were other caveats. For all their cuddly, genial good looks, Golden Retrievers are extremely social dogs who want to work beside their humans. The cute puppies that become grown dogs are ill-suited to haphazard training, intermittent contact, and banishment to the backyard. Hundreds of high-energy, anxious Golden Retrievers end up in rescues and city pounds every year, the result of poor choice-making on the part of owners who want a good dog at their leisure but don't want a Golden that jumps on them in the backyard, the ten-minute-a-day family pet now desperate for affection after long hours of abandonment. The collective research unanimously asserts that Golden Retrievers cannot be treated as accessories. This is true of all dogs, of course, but with a big dog like a Golden, the behavioral result of social neglect can be catastrophic for family and dog.

I was a newcomer to Golden Retrievers, but at least, I thought, I could promise attention, companionship, love. And work. The breed's drives and my own seemed right in sync.

I inquired with several Golden rescue organizations that promised to keep their eyes open for just the right young Golden that might work, but no solid leads emerged there. From pages of notes, I made ten breeder queries, nationwide. Four breeders indicated they had no new litters proposed for the year. Two had pups, but they were already sold. One seemed unwilling to believe I'd travel to get the right dog, no matter how much hypertext I used in my e-mails: *Plane! Car trip! Off for the summer!* Three others never responded. Nine months of close calls and almost-dogs that never came to pass—whole series of Golden Retrievers that nearly came home to me. I had begun to wonder if a wiser universe was telling me something.

"No," said a neighbor, when I whined my frustration. "You said yourself this is more than a dog to be had and a thing to be done. You're being *prepared*." Gerand is a feng shui practitioner whom I've known to find a reasonable meaning in food poisoning and the bad chicken salad behind it, so I listened—and chafed—and waited.

In a moment of serendipity, a breeder who'd been recommended to me by five separate sources responded to tell me that she had a female named Spirit whose pregnancy was established, whose background was what I'd been looking for, and who might be very likely to bear a puppy with an aptitude for SAR. She sent me a link to information and images of her Spirit and the litter's sire, Ozzie, from another breeder on the East Coast. There was obedience, agility, and hunt in the merged background—good health and longevity too.

I already had notes on this breeder's line, but I took a day or so more to review them, imposing some kind of rationality while inside my heart leaped. Everything seemed right about this litter. I sent my application and puppy deposit and began a second wait for a Golden that wasn't yet born, charged with the idea that somewhere out there in the miracle of cell division and good dog DNA, my partner was becoming real.

"Look at that head," said Terry, weeks later. He was looking at a picture of Ozzie, my puppy's sire, a big boy with a genial, teddy-bear expression. "You've gotta smile at a face like that." I agreed. Another in the long list of reasons I wanted a Golden was the attraction factor. We search for children and Alzheimer's patients with some frequency, and I didn't want these victims more scared when they were found than when they were lost. I knew I wanted a light-faced dog with an open, kindly expression.

Terry looked at pictures of pretty mama Spirit, posed calmly in a "watch me" command, and he looked at my first pictures of her puppies, sent two days after the litter was born. Ten pups: nine girls and a boy. They looked like fuzzy tater tots, all butts and tiny ear flaps, their faces obscured as they huddled together. Each wore a little "collar" of colored rickrack for identification.

"I'm taking guesses," I said, pointing to the little tabs of rickrack. "Tell me which one you think will be my puppy, and if you guess correctly, I'll donate one hundred dollars to the Golden rescue of

your choice.” Terry pointed and picked. I’d played this game for a few days. Everyone had a reason for picking the puppy they did. ~~“This one looks like she’s protecting the others,”~~ one said. ~~“This one has a big nose,”~~ said another. I made my choice last, picking a little blond pup curled on her side like comma. In the picture, she was independent and apart from the others, wearing a yellow rickrack collar—and she was fat as a piglet, which suggested she could find something when she wanted it, and she didn’t mind crawling over nine other puppies to get it.

As it happened, I guessed correctly, more fluke than intuition. “Yellow” and all the other pups were pretested for evidence of drive, confidence, and willingness to work for a human at six and again at ten weeks, and their breeder conferred with our SAR team head trainer. It was a close call indeed between this female and the little male. Breeder and trainer talked at length long-distance, and they made a decision for me—like an arranged marriage with four paws and a tail. I found out the day before I flew to Midland. “It’s a girl,” I was told. And she wore yellow rickrack.

Now it was just a matter of meeting her and bringing her home to join my family of three elderly cats and six adult dogs. I’d been raising dogs for years. I thought: *How hard could it be?*

Most of the animals in my house are rescues themselves. Coming from a family that always rescued cats from the pound, some part of me still draws energy from a rowdy, highly interactive little pack of animals, and I have one—a household of distinct personalities, none of them shy about expressing his point of view. A few dogs are fosters, living here on a temporary basis until they stabilize enough to be adoptable—plucked from animal shelters a day before their scheduled euthanasia. Excepting Pomeranians Fo’c’sle Jack and Mr. Sprints’l, the population here swells or decreases as this dog comes in to foster or that dog adopts a new family.

In the weeks preceding the new puppy, they were all aware of my changed motions, but only Sprints’l appeared deeply suspicious as I puppy-proofed the house, mutter-grumbling his way behind me, giving occasional “augh” barks of disapproval. He is a bright, fox-faced little guy, the color of a cigarette filter stubbed out into ash, which sounds ugly—but he is a good-looking dog. Sprints has small, dark eyebrows, and for a couple of weeks they were raised speculatively at the excessive housecleaning, the throwing away of once-loved-but-now-much-ignored small dog toys. The other dogs appeared curious but unconcerned.

Fo’c’sle Jack, the first Pomeranian in the pack, is much attached to me and has always been an easy dog. Jack came into the world mellow. Even though he was attacked by two large off-leash dogs as a pup, a violent event that shook both of us up for months, Jack recovered his equable nature. He doesn’t rattle easily; he rarely barks. A soft and genial orange sable Pomeranian, his chief concern is food: *when’s it coming, how much is coming, and by the way, you could give a guy a treat now and then.* With confident graciousness, Jack’s seen foster dogs come and go. He was the least likely to be affected by this change, I thought, especially if I brought in a puppy of a breed known for its dog-friendliness.

By contrast, rescued Miss Whisky is all nerves, stretched tight as a violin string about to snap. When Whisky’s previous owner, an elderly woman with advancing Alzheimer’s, put a kitchen towel over a gas burner a few years ago, her whole house went up. The woman was pulled from the bedroom alive, and on his way out another firefighter found Whisky crouched in the kitchen between the refrigerator and a cabinet, semiconscious, the long fur of her tail already burning. He pulled the dog free, but in the aftermath of the fire, the woman’s son placed his mother in a care facility and turned Whisky over to the pound. A poorly bred, cowering, traumatized black Pom with few social skills, she was given little time. A rescue organization got her out of the shelter, and I took her a few days later, the fur of her tail still crimped and scorched from heat. She is calmer now, but reactive: new neighbors throw her, the scrape and clunk of the mailman throws her. In truth, a strong breeze can sti

throw Whisky some days. She's in a state of almost permanent exclamation. Though she wags and smiles, her eyes are wary, and she barks about everything like an old record on the skip, shrieking a high note: *Wow! Wow! Wow! Wow! Wow!*

Whisky's staccato bark makes Salty Sophie blink, as though she winks away kickboxing butterfly. Sophie is the smallest of the Poms and perhaps the pluckiest. Another rescue, Sophie had been found duct-taped in a cardboard box and tossed in a Dumpster in Florida. A passerby heard her whimper, extracted the little dog, and then took her for veterinary care—despite the fact she could not keep Sophie herself. She came to us shaved free of mats and ticks, but with serious medical conditions: a collapsing trachea and congestive heart failure, both of which impair her breathing, particularly on hot, humid days. Despite her rough history and medical problems, Sophie is a cheerful, upbeat little dog, a round and waddling creature eager to keep up with household events. Dinnertime inspires Sophie to dance a doggy mambo, and occasionally she gets too excited about her coming food and falls over, dazed and blue about the mouth. But after a moment's pause, she is up again, does a little box step, and makes a honking sound through her nose, the closest she gets to a bark. Sophie is unruffled by the fosters who pass through on a layover to their new homes, and I think she'll get along with a new dog—even a larger dog—just fine, as long as the puppy has a little sense and equilibrium thereby not sitting on small Sophie or spinning her silly on a race through the house.

The senior statesman of the household is Scuppy, aged twenty-one, another rescue who has already taught me much about how a smart dog works the wind.

A friend first e-mailed me about Scuppy after seeing a Petfinder ad pleading his case. A very senior dog who had been the pet of an elderly couple, he was abandoned when the couple died. Neighbors later said that the couple's adult children simply opened the front door and let the old Pomeranian out. Blind and deaf, he had wandered along the street, crossing traffic and colliding into unfamiliar fences for days until someone took him to the pound. There, the shelter's attending vet recognized Scuppy as one of his own former patients. A phone call confirmed the old dog's abandonment. No, the family denied, their mother's dog had died years ago. They knew nothing about a dog, about this dog, about any dog. Nothing, even when the vet's digital photograph exactly matched the stray Pomeranian sitting in a cage at the pound.

The shelter staff had made something of a pet of him as long as possible, but his age and disabilities made him unattractive for adoption. When I called eighteen hours before his scheduled euthanasia, the attendant on the phone wept. The Petfinder ad had been removed, she said. Scuppy couldn't be adopted because he was unneutered, and the law prohibited the adoption of an unaltered pet. But the shelter vet believed he would not survive surgical anesthesia due to his great age, and thus neutering was out of the question. One way or another, it looked like Scuppy would be put to sleep.

I asked about his health apart from the listed disabilities, and she said his condition was good for a dog both elderly and lately neglected. He was an active, mobile dog interested in exploring; he was gentle and responsive to touch. He was just very, very old. The shelter staff had been looking for someone to give him a soft place to live out his last months. But the decision had finalized today—he couldn't be adopted. The woman's voice was weary with the finality of it.

"What about foster?" I suggested. "Could I...sort of permanently...foster this dog?"

She put me on hold.

"What time can you get here?" she asked when she returned to the phone.

"What time do you close?"

"Five-thirty," she said.

"I can be there by five-thirty."

There was a pause. "Come at six," she said, and hung up the phone.

We met behind the shelter later that evening in the dark, where I signed paperwork I couldn't read.

The young woman advised that the normal pet insurance that came with adoption was not available for fosters. Another attendant in the shadows, with bright-red hair lit only by the occasional flare of his cigarette on inhale, said I wouldn't be needing insurance, anyway: an old dog like Scuppy didn't have a whole lot of time. There was a little bundling movement, backlit in fluorescent from the shelter's half-cracked door. The two hustled something into my pet carrier, then scuttled back into the shelter. The whole thing was as quick and dark as an exchange of state secrets, and I would not have been able to recognize either one of them on the street in daylight. It would have been creepy if I'd not sensed how much these two wanted to avoid putting down yet another dog. Especially this one.

In the car, I unzipped the top of the carrier and saw him for the first time, a "clear orange" Pomeranian, his face sunken and white with age. His ears did not flick the way a hearing dog's would and when I gently lifted his chin, I saw his clouded eyes. He was the oldest dog I'd ever seen. Toothless too. Accepting change with equanimity, he yawned, showing a wedge of bare, pink gums. I kept one hand down beside the old boy as I drove, feeling the soft, exploratory huff of his breath against my palm.

Once home, Scuppy accepted the other dogs calmly, submitting to their sniffs and prodding and circling without fuss or complaint. He clearly bewildered them, but something in his demeanor kept them respectful. At suppertime, he stood beside them in the kitchen, barked when he smelled dog food, and put his nose to his bowl as though he'd had this houseful of siblings his entire life. When he finished, he bobbed his nose and scented incoming air as I opened the back door for the other dogs, and he too headed outside, feeling his way along the porch to the ramp leading to the yard. There he revealed unexpected abilities. As he walked the backyard to become familiar with it, Scuppy marked the fence perimeter every few feet, demonstrating a bottomless bladder and a genius ability to meter his pee. He marked an entire fence line in that first single outing. The other dogs stood together and watched him, not one of the little males attempting to best the old boy by peeing over his mark.

He would mark further across the following days: trees, shrubs, the birdbath, a coil of garden hose, a clutch of flowerpots at a fork in the flagstone path leading to the garage. The outside water bowl too, which deeply offended the other Poms until I washed and raised it a little, allowing Scuppy's mark to land on the bricks beneath.

Scuppy clearly loved to be outdoors, and once he'd marked his territory, he never collided with objects again. He would walk the backyard for hours, then sit in the soft grass and lift his nose at the passage of squirrels on the fence or a fluster of pigeons beneath the feeder. When he was ready to come in, he would give a polite, solitary bark from where he sat—a little upward inflection like a query—*errrrr, now?* There he'd wait to be picked up, cuddled, and brought into the house. I learned that I could stand upwind of him many feet away and, waving my hands at knee level, would see him give the signature head pop of recognition I'd learned from the on-scent search dogs. When Scuppy caught the scent of me, he would rise, turn, and follow it to the source, his small tail wagging. And so it was that I learned how to call blind, deaf Scuppy and realized he could come when called just by the scent of me—even across the entire yard.

Having hidden electrical cords, replaced loose mattress batting, and installed some puppy gates, I took up all the cat toys and the small-breed toys, and I told the Pomeranians they'd just have to understand we couldn't have a puppy chew-and-choke hazard around for a while. The Poms tilted their heads when I spoke to them and looked even more speculative. *Something's changing*, their expressions said, *and it don't smell like bacon*. All this commotion began four weeks before Spirit's litter was due on the other side of Texas and fourteen weeks before I could bring the puppy home. I knew it was early, but I lay on the floor and tried to imagine this world through a Golden puppy's eyes. I wondered, in turn, what she would teach me and when.

When she sees me for the first time, Puzzle's expression is skeptical. I am another in a series of strangers bending over the x-pen. She considers and quickly rejects me, immediately gives me up for better things. A tug toy is more interesting. The open-bottomed bucket on its side, more interesting still. Our meeting is not a Hallmark moment between us. Mama Spirit welcomes me with soft generosity, but her blond, dark-eyed daughter with the fuzzy bottom turns away.

I sneak glances at her as Kim and I go through her puppy book and discuss her diet, vaccinations, and pending training. Puzzle isn't the biggest pup of the litter, nor the smallest. She moves through the x-pen with a bit of swagger, boxing toys, taunting her siblings until they wrestle. I see her swipe a stuffed duck from her sister and shoot a glance my direction. Puzzle drops the toy her sister wants and sits on it.

*Somewhere in all of that, I think, is my partner.*

Kim lifts her from the x-pen and puts her on the floor. "She knows 'Sit,' 'Stand,' and 'Come,'" Kim says. "And she should be pretty much housebroken."

"Sit," I say to Puzzle, who waits a molasses half-beat and then sits. And yawns.

"Good girl," I praise her.

*Yada yada*, her expression suggests.

I have never seen so intractable a puppy. My previous pups had cuddled at first meeting, but this one looks like she could spit at me like a llama. And might.

*You have other dogs*, I reassure myself. *This isn't all that new*. I want this ten-week-old Golden to be impressed with me, somehow—because I find her beautiful and full of possibility, and my heart is tight with months of waiting for her.

"Come," I say to Puzzle. She glances at Kim, then stands with elaborate slowness and saunters over. When she reaches me and I pick her up to praise and cuddle her, Puzzle doesn't yield. She leans back with stiff paws against my chest and gives me a long, level gaze.

I love her immediately. She hasn't learned to love me. But in her willingness to come I sense an ethic, and in her scrutiny I see intelligence. I think of the hard places we will go that need both: the disaster sites and gang-riddled neighborhoods, the lakes, the crime scenes and small town with a single missing girl whose case is ongoing, whose fate remains unknown.

I return the puppy's gaze. What began as a late-night conversation in a bar has emerged as a Golden Retriever braced in the bend of my arms. She feels solid and capable. She feels right.

"Hi, sweetheart," I say to Puzzle. "Are you ready to go to work?"

### 3. INTO THE WIND

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I CAME TO GROUND search-and-rescue from the air. The route was not direct. While I was working as a flight instructor in the early 1990s, an experienced student once asked me to fly with him to an area where he'd had a problem on a runway a few days before. A police officer and a talented pilot working on an advanced rating, he had been carrying other law enforcement personnel on a clear autumn day in his single-engine aircraft when, on landing, his plane shot off the end of the short, lakeside runway and down a small embankment before coming to a stop.

No one was hurt, the plane wasn't damaged, but he was an experienced pilot and the event concerned him. He wanted to discuss that landing with me and revisit the runway for touch-and-go practice. From his description of the plane's performance on final approach and the long, long streak from his tires still visible on the asphalt when we got there, I suspected wind shear was responsible, and that his headwind had shifted to a tailwind at an unfortunate point in the landing sequence.

We had different conditions the day we revisited that airstrip, but we worked his touch-and-goes anyway. After a handful of successful, unassisted landings proved to him that the runway itself and his technique for landing on it were not an ongoing problem, he asked if I'd mind a flight around the lake before coming back to the runway to shoot more landings. The request surprised me a little—flight time is expensive—but I agreed.

A cold front had passed the day before. This afternoon was beautifully crisp and clear; low pressure had swept the air clean. From a plane flying low in this kind of weather, you can see the herringbone of wind on water, the definition of individual leaves, the colors on a bobber at the end of a fisherman's line. We made a circle of the lake's long shoreline, my student flying at the regulation altitude. I noticed, however, that his scan of instruments, sky, and ground included a lot of glances straight down, and having flown with him so long, I knew also it wasn't part of his standard procedure.

"What are we looking for, David?" I finally asked.

He didn't answer for a moment. Then he said, "We don't know what he did with her."

Without further comment, we circled the lake into evening, alternating who flew the airplane and who looked for the body of a woman along the lake's ragged shore.

That's how I began working search. In later months, through some grapevine I never completely understood, I gained a clientele who hired me to fly the press or personnel from other law enforcement agencies over variously troubled locations. For some clients, it was a matter of budget. My fixed-wing aircraft was less expensive than a helicopter. For others, it was an attempt to be nondescript: small planes in high-traffic areas attract less attention than rotorcraft. A few said they'd heard I was confident with the airplane; when asked to fly low and slow and stable, within regulations I could do it.

We flew over crime scenes and followed off-road trails suspected as body dumps. We traced the trajectory of downed aircraft in deep wood. As altitude restrictions expired, I flew with photographers over what remained of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City and the Koresh Compound in Waco, Texas. We plotted the paths of tornadoes. We circled livestock stranded on high ground by flood. From the vantage of a high-winged Cessna, my passengers—often press or insurance photographers—documented public and personal catastrophe. They unscrewed the window bracket for an unobstructed view and leaned outward as the slipstream held the window up. "Again," they'd gesture with a little twirl of the index finger, and around we'd go another time.

Not every client was clear about our objectives. Once, a man I took to be an insurance photographer (he came with multiple bags on shoulder straps), turned out to be the son of a rancher who had died. We unscrewed the window bracket so he could photograph the homestead in a long-shadowed sunset.

and he did so, but when that was done he opened what I thought was a second camera case, drew out a large velvet bag, and prepared to drop his father's ashes over the family ranch. This kind of flight request is common, but problems are common too. It's a hire that recommends a good briefing. I saw what he was doing, was just about to give him—*hey!*—a quick word on ashes and slipstream when he was ahead of me, began to pour. Wind carried the ashes back through the window into the airplane, where they whistled around the tiny cabin and ended up all over us.

"Sorry," he said after an appalled moment. I tried to smile and felt the sheen of grit across my teeth like I'd been testing pearls.

Not long afterward, another client had a similar request, but she was more straightforward on the hire and asked to sprinkle her father's ashes outside the small town along the interstate where he'd grown up. We had a good briefing on procedure, and I knew she understood, but when we got to the location she opened the window, took the soft case in her hands to hold it ready, then to extend it and pour—and dropped it entirely. The bag landed like a flour bomb in the middle of a Taco Bell parking lot just off the highway. We could see the astro-shaped burst of ash across the pavement.

We circled a little while in silence. I was thinking about the incident report I might need to file with the FAA. I don't know what she was thinking.

"Dad loved their Enchiritos," said my client at last, and she shut the window.

My own recent transitions were just as clunky. The flight career was still a fledgling; my twelve-year marriage, shot through with its own disasters, failed. And then I was alone. The family worried about my faltering income in "a man's profession," about their daughter newly divorced so young.

They worried about me in airplanes, but flight was perversely my good fortune. Then, as now, it was a mental and physical discipline, a blessed remove. I flew as often for hire as regulations allowed, grateful for the money of course, but I would have flown for free. During the period of divorce, I moved to a seedy, affordable apartment so near a runway that in the middle of the night I could identify individual planes by the grind of their starters, see the alternating flash of the airport beacon—green-white-green-white-green-white—like the *lub-dup* of a heart across the graceless walls of my bedroom.

It was a different time for general aviation before 9/11, when civilian pilots were not so readily framed as a threat. I would unlock the flight school on sleepless nights and check out a Cessna 152, file a flight plan, and go up to admire city skylines or make cross-country jaunts in the dark—flights I recall now for the occasional camaraderie over the radio with air traffic controllers and the night-flying freight dogs, but remember most for their exquisite aloneness. Moon and silver ground and the comfort of the Lycoming engine's cat-purr drone. I would set one radio receiver to the navigation facility closest to my home airport and the other receiver to the facility closest to the point of arrival, and I flew with the counterpoint of their Morse code identifiers beeping out of sync in my headset—literally the sound of where I was going and where I had been.

Though I think my family worried I might be suicidal (which I was not), and I know they would have been frightened to learn I flew in the middle of the night, flight gave me perspective. I think of those flights as private, invisible stitches across Texas in the dark, binding me to a world outside my own grief. Martha Graham once commented that she never thought of a dancer as alone on stage, that he or she was "always partnered by the surrounding space." It was a concept worth borrowing. And what space. On a clear night in still air, the stars were so close they shook up other senses, tempting me to open the window and put out my tongue to the spangle. I would have bet they had a taste, like pop rocks, maybe, or wasabi.

Other nights a blanket of stratiform cloud stretched wide above the little Cessna, and I flew small and secret, like a child with a flashlight under the blanket, flying beneath an eiderdown beautifully up

lit at its edges by the lights of cities on the horizon. The ground went dark for long passages over rural areas, defined by the deeper black of an occasional lake or edged by an interstate highway stippled with traffic. Small towns lay tidy as a tic-tac-toe grid beneath a handful of streetlights. But the peace and order were flecked occasionally with buildings afire, with the *uh-oh-uh-oh-uh-oh* twist of lights from emergency vehicles speeding down an unlit road. I could see them thirty miles away.

It wasn't in me to imagine my own catastrophe. Though there was one late night on an approach to the home airport's north runway that I felt a distinct unease at three hundred feet above the ground in the landing sequence, a sensation I couldn't validate with a crosscheck of the instruments, the sound of the plane, the feel of the air across the wings, or the sight of the windsock on the field. The unease was as profound as a waking shake on the shoulder, an imperative "go around." I followed instinct and aborted the landing, pressing the throttle forward, stabilizing the airplane, and retracting the flaps as airspeed allowed. The second approach was virtually identical to the first, the landing and rollout uneventful. I taxied to the ramp and shut down the airplane, then walked to the edge of the tarmac and gazed out at the runway in the dark, wondering about my little mystery, looking for anything that might have been a problem on the first landing.

Nothing. South end of the field was quiet. I could hear wind tunneling through the windsock across the runway—a keening little song like a pissed-off fairy in a bottle. The beacon's double flash pulsed across the hangars, the planes, the tarmac, and me. Nothing. Nothing. Then movement: a stray dog winding west through the shadows at the end of runway 34. He paused and turned to look my way, caught by the scent or the sound of me. Was the dog what I had sensed earlier? Where had he been the first time I was approaching to land? A gangly, spotted mixed-breed, he blazed red in the glow of the runway end lights, his head lifted in a carrying posture of intelligence. We looked at each other a long moment, in our separate ways making sense of threat and possibility. The dog seemed to make his mind up first. When he turned and loped into the black field beyond, I felt an unreasonable urge to drop my flight case and follow.

Restless. I'd been feeling restless. The encounter with Runway Dog both provoked an urge for change and informed the relationship with my own dogs at home. In the months after that late-night experience at the airport, I paid even closer attention to dog ways of negotiating the environment. Eyes, ears, tongue, nose, pads—and that magical word *vibrissae*, the whiskers of the muzzle and eyebrows that can even perceive changes of airflow—I watched my little housedogs and saw them respond intuitively to a concert of sensory perceptions. Many of their skills were similar to stick and rudder skills I'd learned to use as a pilot—moving air is a whole kaleidoscope of changing textures, palpable to the pilot's hands, feet, and seat of her pants—but even the most sheltered dogs of my crew were better at making whole-body sense of their surroundings than I was.

When a leaf fell into a burning citronella candle and ignited on the back porch, three of the littlest dogs in the house raised their noses simultaneously, nostrils working, before they brought eyes and ears to bear and turned their heads to look in the direction of the fire, separated by a screen door and six yards away. Scent first indicated change; sight and sound were used to make better sense of it. Though all three dogs grew excited, Mr. Sprits'l alone ran to find me one room away, quivering and barking furiously, every hair electric, leading me back to the trouble. (When Sprits'l is excited, he tends to spin rather than travel in a straight line; this made our trip back to the porch rather like following a dreidel.)

Not a little fire. I extinguished the bucket of flame that had been a candle, thinking all the while about the clarity of Sprits'l's message: *Not normal. Not right. Back here. No, back here. Fix this.* He had not simply barked at the flame; he'd not run to another dog to telegraph the news. He'd come to me without hesitation, and when I went out the door to take care of it, Sprits did not attempt to follow

I realized that to this dog there were certain givens in our relationship, and that I was not only a bringer of food and a scratcher of chest, but I was also a trusted protector. I knew that, but I didn't know *he* knew that.

What else would dogs tell me? What else did dogs know?

Curiosity led me to consider volunteer opportunities with working dogs—dogs whose job descriptions included making sense of a changing environment and communicating that change to a human. I wanted to try for that kind of connection. And our large urban area presented plenty of opportunities. Depending on level of interest and commitment, I learned I could be a puppy-raiser for guide dogs, a once-a-week socializer of assist dogs, and—most interesting to me—an assistant in the field on a canine search-and-rescue team. They were all time-intensive opportunities, especially SAR. Three to seven training hours a week, plus expected home study, plus emergency calls.

One friend asked, “Does it pay well?”

A relative sighed, “You are never going to marry again.”

My oldest friend understood. “Of course,” Marina said. “You’ve got a history of getting out there. makes sense you’d want to learn to fly a dog.”

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I visited the K9 team I would eventually join after finding a 1995 photograph from the *Dallas Morning News* that I'd cut out during the aftermath of Oklahoma City's Murrah Federal Building bombing. Skip Fernandez, a canine handler with the Miami-Dade County Fire Rescue team, sits on the ground with his head bowed and eyes closed against the back of his Golden Retriever, Aspen. The caption states that they have worked all night, and they look it. They are dirty. The dog sits rolled over onto one hip, propped up by her front legs. She looks tired. Her expression is subdued.

I don't know why I originally clipped the photo, but when I found it six years later, I felt convinced. While some disasters needed air support, almost all of them needed dogs on the ground to locate the living and the dead—and partners beside them to translate. Though the process itself was a mystery to me, I was eager to understand dogs better on their own terms. And perhaps I had something to contribute: As a pilot I had begun to learn the workings of the wind. I could talk on the radio. I wasn't squeamish or afraid of the dark. Surely that was enough to make a start at this. Nothing about the work looked easy, but canine search-and-rescue looked like work I wanted to do.

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