

One

First on the Scene

At the halfway point, Jody Murphy made the turn and headed back the way she'd come on her six-mile conditioning run. Glancing over her shoulder, Jody saw her companion, Flag, a black and white border collie, take the opportunity to pause and lift her snout to the early morning scents along the river. If Flag had been a human exhibiting the same behavior, Jody would have assumed she was thinking. But what, she wondered, was going through the dog's consciousness? Anything more than a cataloging of the smells? Flag looked over her shoulder at Jody, and dropped her ears to make that canine facial expression that looks so much like a smile. Then she too turned, and loped to catch up. Absently, Jody reached down and ruffled the soft fur on the dog's head.

Her foot falls thudding on the dirt trail, Jody went back to memories of the pair's last search and rescue mission. She recalled how Flag had tugged at the end of her eight-foot leash, pulling Jody gently away from the decaying body. Flag had been on scent all morning, drawing ever closer to the lost hiker, but by the time they found her, both Flag and Jody saw it was too late to help the woman.

If only the district ranger had called Jody and her canine squad in sooner, before dozens of searchers had trampled the rocky trail and filled the air with the scent of too many humans. With a clean trail, Flag would surely have found the woman sitting among the rocks thirty feet below the trail in time to save her.

The woman's belongings scattered about told the end of her story. The shiny plastic of a full water bottle glinted in the noonday sun, wedged between rocks ten feet downslope from where it had escaped her small pack. A dark stain on a boulder to her left showed where her head had likely made initial contact, and yet the body sat upright. She'd regained consciousness long enough to get herself into a seated position. Her pack was pulled into her lap, but a whistle inside was untouched. None of the searchers on the trail above had heard her call or seen any signs or signals of her presence below. At the same time, she must have drifted in and out of consciousness for days before she died.

Once Flag had drawn Jody to the find, and Jody had radioed in, she sat to await the arrival of law enforcement. She'd filled Flag's folding water dish and watched as her thirsty dog lapped.

Quenched, Flag dropped to lie on the rock, her back turned to the body, and gazed over the forest below. While she sat, Jody resolved to talk to the district ranger about requesting her canine teams earlier in the next search. The next time a hiker went missing, the dogs and their skills would get the respect they were due and get called first, not after the trail had already gone nearly cold and everyone else had given up.

Jody turned her attention back to the trail ahead. She glanced down at Flag, who was not even breathing hard. Time to step it up for the final mile. Jody leaned forward and broke into a sprint. What she loved about any kind of focused physical exertion was how all of the thoughts of what should have been, the regrets about choices not made, and the sadness about lost loved ones, vanished completely, for a time.

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