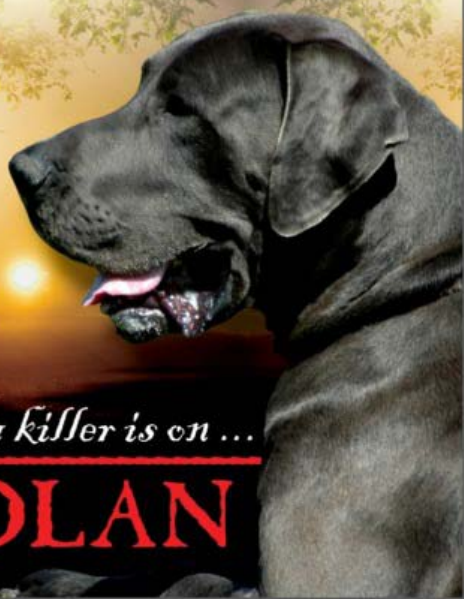


ALL GONE RJ NOLAN

All GONE



The hunt for a killer is on ...

RJ NOLAN



All Gone

Excerpt

By

RJ Nolan



All Gone

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eBook ISBN: 978-1-934889-09-1
Paperback ISBN: 978-1-934889-37-4
Audio ISBN: 978-0-9800846-0-3

First Edition
eBook Format
Published December 2007
Print July 2009

This Book is Published by
L-Book ePublisher
La Quinta, Ca. 92253
Web Site: <http://L-Book.com>

Executive Editor: Pam Salerno

Cover Design by Sheri
graphicartist2020@hotmail.com

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Excerpt

CHAPTER 1

DR. KODY GARRETT smiled down at Blackjack, her fourteen month old Great Dane. "Come on, Jack. It's time to go to work."

The big dog jumped to his feet and began to wag his tail exuberantly. Kody had been working at the North Park Animal Clinic for the last eight months. Since starting to work for Dr. Herbert Donaldson, Jack was only allowed to accompany her to work on the days the senior vet was not present. Before coming to work for Dr. Donaldson, she had worked at another vet clinic. Her previous boss, Dr. Richardson, had loved Blackjack and encouraged her to bring him to work even as a then boisterous young pup. This week was going to be different. For the first time, in the eight months that she had worked for the curmudgeonly vet he was attending a medical conference and left her alone to run the clinic. Although it would make for a long week working alone, she was looking forward to a reprieve of her boss' presence.

Kody shrugged off the troubling thoughts. She loved working at the small clinic and tried her best not to let her boss' gruff manner and poor attitude affect her. It would give her the chance to prove to Dr. Donaldson that she was capable of the responsibility he had entrusted her with. It was going to be a good week, she just knew it.

She could not have been more wrong...

* * *

"Dr. Garrett, we need you in Exam two. Right now."

Kody looked up from the dog she was bandaging. She was immediately concerned by the woman's tone of voice. "What've we got?" she asked. Andrea, a short, slightly overweight brunette was one of her best vet techs.

"Mrs. Daily just walked in with Missy, her Pomeranian. The little dog looks bad. She's very lethargic and her gums are extremely pale," Andrea said.

"Finish up here for me, Mike," she said to the tech who had been assisting her before quickly heading for the exam room.

Kody stepped into the exam room to find a slightly built elderly lady clutching a small dog to her chest.

"Hello, Mrs. Daily. I'm Dr. Garrett. I understand Missy isn't feeling well. Let's take a look at her." She carefully lifted the dog from the woman's arms and placed her gently on the exam table. Kody immediately began to examine the little dog. "So what has been going on with Missy?"

"I don't know. Missy just hasn't been herself for the last few days. She's so tired and hasn't been eating well. I took her outside this morning and she fell trying to climb the steps coming back in. She just wouldn't get up."

"Have you given her anything different, food or medicine?"

"No, just what she always gets."

"Has she been vomiting or had diarrhea?" Kody palpated the dog's abdomen continuing to perform a thorough physical examination as she questioned the owner.

"No, nothing like that. She's just been very tired."

Kody was getting very worried. The dog was unresponsive to stimuli. Its gums were pale with poor capillary refill. Missy's respiratory rate was very high, as was her heart rate while her breathing was very shallow. All the symptoms pointed toward systemic shock, but from what Kody didn't know. She could feel tremors rippling through the little dog's body.

"Is it possible she got into something?" Kody continued her line of questioning trying to narrow the cause of the dog's distress.

"No... She's always with me. What's wrong with her?" Mrs. Daily asked.

Kody had never seen the Pomeranian before. Missy and Mrs. Daily were Dr. Donaldson's clients.

"I'm going to take her in the back and..." The little dog went very still under her hands. She quickly brought her stethoscope down to listen to the dog's heartbeat. She grimaced internally when she didn't find one. *Damn it!* She noticed the dog had released a large puddle of maroon colored stool.

She grabbed the dog and headed for the back room. "Stay here," she said when Mrs. Daily attempted to follow her.

* * *

After trying repeatedly to resuscitate the dog with no success, Kody finally admitted defeat. She reached out and stroked the little dog gently. "It's no good; she's gone," she said to Barbara, the tech who had been helping her.

"Get her cleaned up in case the owner would like to see her," she said before turning to head back to the exam room to give Mrs. Daily the bad news.

Kody walked slowly toward the exam room trying to prepare herself for the ordeal of telling the elderly woman that her dog was dead. This was a part of her job that she had never got used to and knew she never would. She stepped into the exam room and met the woman's eyes.

"I'm so sorry. I did everything I could. She's gone."

Mrs. Daily's eyes filled with tears. "She can't be gone... She can't be. Do something!"

"I did everything I could. I'm very sorry for your loss," Kody said softly.

"I want to see her."

"All right, it will be just a few minutes. I'll come back and get you."

* * *

Mrs. Daily stared at Kody in disbelief, then at her dog lying on the table. "Missy... Missy," she called to the little dog, her voice taking on a slightly hysterical note. "Come on, don't scare Mommy," she said, reaching out and stroking Missy's side. The woman wrapped her arms around her dog and began to sob.

Kody sighed. There was nothing she could do and she had other patients waiting. She took one last look at the little Pom and her broken hearted owner. It just figured, Dr. Donaldson had only been gone a day to his conference and she had already managed to lose one of his patients.

* * *

Kody scrubbed her hands over her face. She had gone over Missy's chart several times trying to spot something she might have missed. There was nothing in her history to explain her sudden demise. Up to this point, she had been a healthy, happy dog. Her most serious medical problem to date had been a severe ear infection due to an embedded foxtail. It just didn't make any sense. Even though the little dog had been eight years old, her annual visit had been only a month ago and Dr. Donaldson had found nothing out of the ordinary on a physical examination. The owner had even consented to running a senior blood panel on Missy for screening purposes. It had come back completely normal.

Kody sighed in frustration; she hated losing a patient. She reached up and rubbed her tight neck muscles. A quiet growl from Blackjack warned her of another's presence just before two warm hands landed on her shoulders and began to massage the tight muscles. Glancing over her shoulder, she looked into

the pale green eyes of her vet tech, Barbara. Kody couldn't hold back a groan when the woman hit a particularly tight spot.

The strawberry blond hadn't been working at the clinic for much longer than Kody. She had only been hired a few weeks prior to Kody.

The strong hands kneading the tight muscles of her shoulders felt wonderful and momentarily short-circuited Kody's brain. The ringing of the phone reminded her where she was and how unprofessional her behavior. She liked Barbara and all the staff at the hospital, but strived to maintain a professional relationship with them; anything else would be inappropriate and a big mistake. If they had met under different circumstances, Kody might have been interested in the cute blond; she was just the type she normally went for. But Kody knew in this particular situation that was impossible. She pulled away and reached for the phone.

Barbara reached out and placed her hand on top of Kody's. "I already set up the machine," she whispered near Kody's ear, her hot breath drawing an involuntary shudder from the woman. As if on cue, Kody heard the automatic voice message click on.

Barbara's hands went back to her shoulders, but Kody pulled away and stood up to face the tech. At five foot nine, she towered over the petite, slenderly built tech.

"Are all the animals settled for the night?" Kody asked with a very neutral look on her face, trying to regain her professional demeanor.

Barbara, over the last few months, had begun to be more familiar than she should with the doctor, saying things that bordered on flirtatious as well as making comments that could be construed as sexual innuendo. It was nothing blatant enough for Kody to call the woman on, but she had felt uncomfortable with the situation. Barbara had tried numerous times to get Kody to go out with her and the other techs after work to socialize. Kody had consistently but politely refused. Tonight

had been different. Barbara had never touched her, except for the normal contact of two people working together until tonight. Kody had tried to discourage the woman's interest in her but obviously, she hadn't done enough. She didn't want to alienate anyone she had to work with every day.

Kody tried very hard to keep her personal life personal; she always had. She had grown up in a small town where everyone's personal business was known by everyone else. As she had gotten older, she had grown to resent the small town lifestyle where people knew every where you went, everything you did, and with whom you did it. She and her twin brother, Kyle, were well known. Most days her mother knew what they had been up to even before they got home from school. Kody had realized early that she was not like the other girls, which had added to her sense of alienation. The last thing she wanted to do was mix her personal life with her professional one.

Barbara blinked at Kody's sudden change in demeanor. She had thought she had finally broken through the woman's stand-offish behavior after trying for months to connect with her.

"Yes, everything is locked up and everyone is settled for the night... It's just you and me," she said with a flirtatious smile.

"Good. I'll see you in the morning then," Kody said.

Barbara felt her anger rise at the abrupt brush-off. She took a deep breath and decided to try again. After all, Kody hadn't protested when she massaged her shoulders.

"It's been a hard day, what with losing Missy and all. I know a great little bar not far from here. Let's go for a drink."

Kody now realized that she should have tried harder to nip this in the bud, before she found herself in this situation.

"No thank you," Kody said.

"Come on. It'll be fun," Barbara invited with a warm smile and reached out to stroke Kody's forearm. "It's just two co-workers having a drink together."

Kody knew from Barbara's expression that it was a lot more than that. She tried to put some distance between herself and the tech. Unfortunately, there was not a lot of space to move in her tiny office. Blackjack's blanket took up more than half of the available floor space.

"I'm sorry, no. It's a personal policy of mine. I never socialize with co-workers outside of work."

"It's just a drink," Barbara said. This was not going at all how she planned.

"It has been a long day. I need to get home and feed Blackjack." Kody quickly gathered up her things. She could see how angry the tech was. Calling Blackjack to her side, she quickly made her exit without a backward glance.

Barbara stared after the vet, surprised by her quick exit. "Bitch," she said. *She's just like all the others.* She stared after the dark haired woman and the big dog. She had tried several times to make friends with the dog, but he wanted nothing to do with her. Although she was furious at Kody for turning her down, she couldn't help admiring Kody's curves and shapely ass as she walked away.

CHAPTER 2

"**G**OOD MORNING, Dr. Garrett," Emily said when Kody stepped into the clinic the next day.

Emily was the most senior staff member aside from Dr. Donaldson. She had started with him shortly after he opened the clinic as a receptionist, and then eventually became the clinic's office manager. Emily enjoyed working with clients and their animals and had continued on with her receptionist duties even after assuming the office manager position. She was in her early fifties and looked after and mothered all the young vet techs. Her figure had spread with middle age, but she was still a good looking woman with wavy brown hair that was lightly streaked with gray and warm, friendly brown eyes.

"Blackjack," she called to the big black dog at Kody's side. "Are you being a good boy?"

The dog wagged his tail and whined, but didn't budge from Kody's side. Kody was thankful that none of the staff shared Dr. Donaldson's poor opinion of giant breed dogs. She still vividly remembered his reaction to his first sight of Blackjack. He had even gone so far as to comment on the fact that he would never understand why someone would want such a huge animal and insinuated the dog was nothing more than a freak novelty. Kody had managed, barely, to keep her temper and made sure never to bring the dog around when Donaldson was working. There were only two Great Danes among their current clientele. She had met the first one within days of starting at the clinic. She smiled fondly at the memory of Kris Rawlings and Willy. Kody had made sure she got to see the other Dane, a

beautiful, young, brindle female on her next visit and quickly won over her owners.

Kody opened the short half door and stepped behind the high counter where Emily sat. As soon as she let Blackjack off his leash he headed for Emily and sat down in front of her. The woman laughed, providing him with his morning ear rub and a biscuit. Blackjack gulped down the biscuit and begged for another, acting like he was starving.

"He did just have breakfast."

"Oh, come on, Doc. He's just a growing boy. Aren't you, Blackjack?" Emily reached out and patted him. The big dog woofed softly and licked Emily's face.

Kody laughed at the pair. Of all the staff at the clinic, Emily was Blackjack's favorite. "Come on, you big mooch, let's go." This was a running battle she had with Emily since the first time she brought Blackjack into the clinic as a then six month old puppy. Left to herself, Emily would stuff him with dog cookies all day.

Blackjack happily trotted over to Kody's side.

"So what do we have on this morning?" Kody asked.

Today was their short day; the clinic was only open until noon on Wednesday. Kody normally didn't work on Wednesdays, but with Dr. Donaldson away at his medical meeting she was covering the clinic every day this week.

Emily looked up at Kody trying not to snicker. "Your favorite patient has an appointment this morning."

Kody narrowed her eyes suspiciously when she spotted the mischievous sparkle in her eyes. She thought about it for several seconds, and then groaned. She couldn't help it.

"Mr. Stevens called and left a message last night. I called him back and he's bringing in Puddles... and he wanted to make sure you would be the one to see her," Emily added, trying to keep a straight face. All the staff was aware of the man's infatuation with Kody.

Mr. Stevens owned an ill tempered, hugely overweight cat. The cat had originally been Dr. Donaldson's patient, but Kody had the misfortune of seeing the cat on her very first day at the clinic. Mr. Stevens had insisted on her seeing Puddles ever since. The cat had hated her on sight, and hissed every time she came near it. The cat's medical problems were exacerbated by the owner's over-feeding and not giving Puddles her prescribed medications. Kody had already had several go-rounds with the cat and had come out of each encounter looking worse for the wear, much to the amusement of her staff.

"What else?" Kody asked.

Emily chuckled sympathetically. "Ms. Philips is bringing in Charlie for a re-check."

Kody smiled. Charlie was the German Shepherd on which she had operated last week. He was a sweet boy who, thankfully, loved her and never gave her trouble. His owner, Ms. Philips, was a vet's dream for a client. She was easy to deal with, very compliant in following instructions and just an all around enjoyable person.

"Okay, I'm going to make some follow-up calls. Let me know when you're ready for me."

Kody glanced into the treatment room and waved to several techs before heading into her office. She was relieved not to have run into Barbara. She got Blackjack settled on his blanket and sat down to do her morning call-backs.

* * *

Kody squared her shoulders and plastered a fake smile on her face before stepping into the exam room.

"Hello, Mr. Stevens."

Mr. Stevens was a short, rotund man in his mid-forties. His dishwater blond hair was coiled up on top of his head in an unsuccessful attempt to cover an ever widening bald spot.

"Perry... Please, call me Perry," he said.

"So what seems to be the problem with Puddles?"

The huge gray cat hissed at her from the safety of her owner's arms.

"Now, now... be nice to the beautiful lady; she's going to make you all better," Mr. Stevens said, stroking the hissing cat's fur gently. He looked up at Kody and gazed into her eyes for several moments. Perry had been attracted to the beautiful, curly haired brunette with the striking gray eyes from the very first time he had seen her. He had asked her out twice before, and she had politely turned him down, stating that she did not date clients. Undaunted he was determined to try again.

Kody shifted uncomfortably and looked away. "What's the problem with Puddles?" she asked again.

"Oh, um..." Mr. Stevens seemed at a loss for words for a moment. Puddles shifting suddenly in his arms seemed to remind him why he was here. "Puddles isn't using her litter box again, and I found what looked like blood mixed with pee on the carpet."

"Have you been giving her the pills I prescribed to acidify her urine?"

Puddles had been treated for a bladder infection and crystals in her urine several months ago.

Mr. Stevens hung his head guiltily. "She doesn't like them and she refuses to eat that special diet. She went the whole morning and wouldn't eat one bite. I got scared and fed her the regular food."

Kody sighed, careful not to let Mr. Stevens hear her. "It's very important that she gets her medication and eats the reduced-calorie food. All this extra weight isn't good for her. Just remember, you're doing it for her own good." They'd had this conversation several times already.

Mr. Stevens refused to meet Kody's eyes.

"I'll need to get a urine sample from Puddles."

"You're going to stick a needle into her bladder again?" Mr. Stevens asked, looking a little green at the thought. "It won't hurt her... right... You promise you won't hurt her?"

Kody preferred not to get a urine sample that way if she could avoid it, but with the uncooperative cat it was a necessity. "I'll sedate her beforehand. She'll be fine. Before I get the urine sample let me check her out, make sure there is nothing else bothering her," she said, holding out her hands to take Puddles.

Mr. Stevens looked hesitant then started to hand Puddles over. The big cat let out a snarl when he tried to place her in Kody's arms. Faster than you would have thought possible for such a large cat, Puddles launched herself at Kody, digging her claws into Kody's lab coat. Before Kody could react, she had thirty pounds of hissing feline attached to her chest. She reached up and grabbed the cat by the scruff of the neck. Puddles snarled in outrage.

"Please don't hurt her!"

"I'm not hurting her," Kody said through gritted teeth as she struggled to control the cat.

Puddles dug her claws in deeper and Kody winced as the sharp claws penetrated her clothing and reached bare skin.

"Wait here. I'll just take her into the back and examine her there," Kody said as calmly as she could.

She quickly hurried out the door with the snarling, hissing feline digging in for all she was worth.

"Help!" Kody called as soon as she stepped into the treatment room.

Mike looked up at his boss and stared at her in disbelief then started to laugh. The stocky, fair haired, ex-marine with his high and tight hair cut looked like he belonged on a Marine Corps recruiting poster. He had come to the clinic as a vet tech after a four-year stint in the Marines.

Kody glared at Mike when he started laughing. "Now!"

Lisa stepped into the room as Mike promptly donned a pair of heavy gloves that reached up to his elbows. Quickly realizing the predicament Dr. Garrett had gotten herself into,

she hurried over to help. With Lisa's help, Mike managed to pry the hissing animal off Kody.

"Let's get her sedated," Kody said as soon as she was free. She glanced down at her lab coat and muttered a curse. There was a distinct yellow spot on the front of her lab coat. The smell of urine was unmistakable. Not only had Puddles clawed her, she had urinated on her as well.

She looked up and scowled at the techs when she heard several snickers. Mike and Lisa quickly turned away before Kody could see their grins. Kody worked quickly once the sedative kicked in. She thoroughly examined the cat and got a fresh urine sample.

After donning a fresh lab coat, she carried the now calm cat back to its owner to explain just what needed to be done for the animal, although she didn't have a lot of hope that the owner would comply with her instructions.

* * *

Kody looked up when the door to the exam room opened. She was in the midst of checking Charlie's incision site.

"Dr. Garrett, excuse me for interrupting, but we need you in the back," Lisa said.

Despite the tech's calm manner, Kody could see the urgency in her hazel eyes. Lisa was the youngest of the technicians at twenty one. The lanky redhead was turning into a solid, reliable vet tech. Kody had spoken with the techs previously about unnecessarily alarming clients. She quickly excused herself to Ms. Philips and followed the tech out.

"What've we got?" she asked, hurrying after the tech toward the treatment room.

"The Palmers just brought in Buddy. He's totally unresponsive."

"Damn it," Kody said.

Buddy was a seven year old mixed breed dog. He had presented two months ago with his owner's, who complained

that he was lethargic, not eating and was losing his hair along both sides of his body. Blood work had turned up that he had hypothyroidism. With supplementation, he had been steadily improving. On his last visit, two weeks ago, he had appeared a happy, energetic little dog. Now Kody wondered if she had missed something. She found Barbara bent over the dog with a stethoscope pressed to his chest.

Barbara looked up at Kody and shook her head.

Kody's shoulders slumped. She couldn't believe it; Buddy was the second patient to die in two days. First Missy, yesterday, and now Buddy, today. Animals died frequently. It was a sad fact due to their much shorter life spans, but not like this. These were two apparently healthy dogs.

"Did you ever get a heartbeat?" Kody asked, stepping up next to the tech, hoping she would be able to resuscitate the dog.

"No. He was already gone when I checked him," Barbara said.

Kody pressed her stethoscope to the dog's chest confirming there was no heart beat. Sighing heavily, she looked over the little dog. She frowned when she spotted a hematoma on one ear. Looking a bit closer, she noticed a bruise on his belly where his hair was white and very thin. Kody wondered what, if anything, the bruising had to do with Buddy's sudden demise.

Kody looked up at Barbara; she blinked wondering at the expression she had seen before the woman schooled her features into a more neutral appearance. Kody brushed it off, figuring the woman was still angry about last night and turned her concern to the Palmers.

"Are the Palmers in a room?"

"No. They're waiting out front," Lisa said. She had remained while Kody examined the dog.

Kody sighed. "Okay, put them in a room and I'll be there as soon as I finish up with Charlie."

* * *

Kody forced a smile onto her face and stepped back into the exam room where Charlie and Ms. Philips were waiting.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting."

Ms. Philips looked at Kody closely and reached out to lay a gentle hand on her arm. "Is everything all right?"

Kody started in surprise and stared for a second at the pretty red-head. She obviously needed to work on hiding her feelings better, but Buddy's death had really upset her. "Um... yes. Charlie is fine. His incision looks great," she said intentionally appearing to misunderstand Ms. Philips.

Ms. Philips raised her eyebrow at Kody but chose not to comment further. "That's great to hear," she said with a warm smile.

Kody finished up with Ms. Philips and Charlie, then headed into exam one to give Buddy's owners the bad news.

* * *

Kody looked over when Blackjack whined. The big dog was stretched out on the floor behind her chair. Glancing at the clock, she was surprised to see how late it was. It was well past his dinner time.

She had spoken to the Palmers at length. They had insisted that Buddy had been perfectly fine until a week ago. He had become lethargic again and they had thought that he might need his medication adjusted. They had called the clinic the day before yesterday and had been scheduled to bring Buddy in tomorrow. The Palmers had arrived home from work and found Buddy lying on the kitchen floor in a large pool of strangely colored feces.

As soon as she had gotten home, Kody had sat down in her study and began going over her books and searching the internet for something that would explain what happened to Buddy and now, she realized, possibly Missy as well.

Kody had come up with several possible causes, but one stood out from the rest. She sent up a silent prayer that in this case, she was wrong. She would have to contact both owners first thing tomorrow.

CHAPTER 3

KODY STRETCHED her tight back muscles and sighed. She was glad the day was almost over. Yesterday, for the first time ever, she had dreaded coming into work. After losing two patients in two days, she had cringed every time she was called into a room with an emergency. They had all turned out well, for which she was very grateful. She didn't think she could have handled losing another animal so soon.

She had talked to both Mrs. Daily and Mrs. Palmer, but neither had been able to give her any further insight into their animals' demise.

Today, Kody had come into the clinic in a better frame of mind. It had been busy all day; she had not even had time for lunch. All she needed to do now was finish one last check of the in-house patients, and then she and Blackjack could head home.

Kody knelt down to open the crate of a little Jack Russell Terrier she had operated on a week ago. Dancer had jumped down from his owner's tall, four poster bed and subluxated his patella. He had required surgery to stabilize his knee.

"Hey, little guy. How are you feeling? Ready to go home tomorrow?"

The little dog jumped up and his whole rear end began to wag as he barked excitedly. The Smiths had several young children and had asked if Dancer could stay at the clinic for the first week after his surgery. Mrs. Smith was worried the energetic little dog would do himself injury. He loved the children and she knew it was going to be difficult to keep him

from over doing it once he got home. He lived to play with their three young children and they loved him just as much.

Dancer had been improving every day. Kody lifted the dog out of the crate to check his knee brace. It was like trying to examine a whirling dervish. The dog was in perpetual motion, squirming trying to get down. Kody was distracted for a second by the dog in the next crate and that was all Dancer needed. He twisted himself out of Kody's hands and took off. Even with the brace on his rear leg, the little dog was fast.

"Shit!" Kody took off after the runaway dog. She caught sight of him just as he rounded the corner and ducked into the doorway to one of the exam rooms. Kody swore colorfully when she realized the door leading to the lobby on the other side of the exam room was open. She sprinted toward the little dog and bent over at the waist as she reached out to grab him just as he exited the exam room. Kody's attention was totally focused on Dancer.

"Come here, Dancer!"

Dancer easily ducked around a pair of legs that suddenly appeared in his path – Kody was not as agile as the little dog. Too late, she realized, someone was standing directly outside the exam room door. She tried to stop, but her feet slid on the slippery linoleum floor. She plowed into the person like a linebacker making a tackle. They both went down – hard.

Kody gasped and her breath left in a whoosh as she landed on top of a very firm body. She was stunned by the force of the fall. Shaking her head to clear the daze, she lifted herself up and looked into the face of the woman she had flattened. Her breath caught and she stared into the deepest green eyes she had ever seen. It was like looking into a living emerald. Even more striking than their vivid color was the gold starburst that circled the dark irises.

Kody was brought back to her senses by the woman's deep, husky voice. "Comfy?" The fine lines around the woman's eyes crinkled when a smirk appeared on her face.

Kody blushed furiously, realizing how intimately they were pressed together. "I'm so sorry... I am... I..."

Not only was she lying stretched out full length on top of the woman, but she also had no idea how long she had been staring mesmerized into her eyes.

The woman laughed. "Apology accepted. Now, maybe you could let me up?"

Kody cringed at the laughter the woman's remark caused and realized they had an audience. In her hurry to get off the woman, Kody's knee slipped and she kned her directly between the legs. She flinched at the woman's pained grunt. Kody scrambled to her feet and offered the woman a hand to help her off the floor, apologizing profusely the whole time.

BJ stared at the admittedly beautiful brunette with her short, dark curly hair and striking gray eyes. Noticing the lab coat for the first time, she realized this must be the vet who had called the office. She gazed at the brunette's hand suspiciously, wondering if she dared take it. In a matter of minutes, the woman had slammed her to the floor, and then kned her.

"It's okay... no problem," BJ said as the vet continued to apologize.

BJ reached out cautiously and accepted the woman's hand her eyes widening in surprise when her fingers tingled at the vet's touch. When she regained her feet, BJ bent over slightly with her hands placed on her thighs, fighting the instinct to cup her painfully throbbing sex. The woman had nailed her, but good.

Kody was at a total loss for words, confused by her body's reaction to the simple touch of the other woman's hand. When the woman stood to her full height, Kody got her first good look at her. She was tall, easily matching Kody's five foot nine stature. But she was stockier built and worked out, if the toned biceps and forearms showing below the sleeve of her shirt were any indication. Her dark hair was clipper cut, extremely short on the sides and back in a very masculine style, then a bit

longer and spiked on top. Strangely, the haircut didn't seem the least bit masculine on the woman; she was handsome without appearing manly.

Emily looked at her boss worriedly. She hadn't said a word after the officer had waved off her repeated apologies and just stood mutely staring at the woman.

"Dr. Garrett, this is Officer BJ Braden and her partner, Officer Neil Martin," Emily said.

Kody flushed and shook herself out of her stupor, realizing that she had been staring again. She had been so shaken up by everything that she hadn't even registered that the woman was wearing a uniform. Noticing the man standing nearby in a matching uniform for the first time, she looked over at Officer Braden's partner. He was incredibly handsome with sun-bleached blond hair and dark vivid blue eyes. Kody estimated he must be at least six foot five. He looked like he belonged on a movie set somewhere instead of her lobby.

Neil grinned at the vet. "Did you by chance lose this?" he asked, holding a squirming Dancer in one of his big hands.

As seemed her perpetual state this evening, Kody's face once again flushed with color. "Thanks," she said as she took the little dog from the officer. "You're in big trouble, little man," she muttered drawing a laugh from the two officers.

Turning back to business, she looked at the two visitors questioningly, wondering why animal control officers were in her lobby. "What can I do for you, Officers?"

"We got a report yesterday that you had called concerning two dogs that died. Sorry, we couldn't get here sooner," BJ said.

Yesterday had been so hectic that Kody had totally forgotten about the call she had put in to animal control.

Kody smiled at the two officers. "Thanks for coming down. Just let me put this little trouble maker back in his crate, and I'll be right with you." She turned toward the receptionist. "Emily, could you take the two officers into Dr. Donaldson's

office and I will be right in." Kody knew there wasn't room for the three of them to meet in her small office.

* * *

Kody had taken a few minutes, after putting Dancer away, to regain her composure. She didn't know what had come over her after she ended up on top of the decidedly androgynous but extremely good looking officer. It wasn't like her to peruse someone like that. Not to mention the fact that the officer wasn't the type of woman she was usually attracted to. She stepped into Dr. Donaldson's large office and found both officers already seated in front of his desk. They rose as she entered.

Kody smiled. "Please have a seat." She took a seat behind the desk. "Officer Braden, I want to apologize again for what happened. I'm really sorry, and I hope you're okay."

"It's BJ, and apology accepted."

Kody nodded her thanks and looked at the two officers expectantly.

Neil flipped open his notebook and quickly turned to business. "Now, Dr. Garrett, what has you concerned about the two deaths you reported?"

Kody quickly explained what had happened to the two dogs.

"So I'm assuming you don't think the deaths were from natural causes?" Neil asked.

"I researched the possible causes of the symptoms both dogs presented that could explain their respective demises. There are a number of conditions that could cause the same symptoms. But after speaking extensively to each owner and reviewing each dog's medical history, I feel there is a strong possibility that these two dogs were poisoned. I checked their patient records and they live within three blocks of each other. I wasn't able to convince either owner to allow me to perform a necropsy and both dogs have been sent for cremation. At this

point, I have nothing but my suspicions, but I wanted to inform animal control of a potential problem. Is there anything you can do?" she asked, looking at the officers beseechingly.

"Think it may be a case of accidental poisoning?" BJ asked.

"That, I don't know. I certainly hope so, but to have two dogs come in only a day apart, with the same symptoms, worries me."

"If you'll give us the name and addresses of the owners we'll look into it," Neil said.

Kody hesitated. "I really don't want to upset the owners with what are, at this point, unfounded suspicions. I spoke to both owners yesterday and neither had anything to add to what had happened and both were still extremely distraught."

BJ nodded. "We understand that. The loss of a beloved pet at the best of times is devastating without adding the possibility of the animal having been poisoned, however unintentionally. We'll simply tell the owners we are conducting an investigation on pet health in their neighborhood. We won't inform them that it has anything to do with their dogs until we have more information. It may be something as simple as someone in the neighborhood who is having a rodent problem and used poison, not realizing the impact it can have on other animals."

"Great. I'll have Emily –"

Kody was cut off when the office door opened suddenly. One look at her tech's face and she was on her feet before Andrea could say a word.

"Excuse me," she said as she hurried out of the room.

* * *

"What have we got?"

"Mrs. Quinn just brought in Blackie, her lab. He's bleeding from his nose; his gums are pale; respiratory rate is high. His breathing is very labored, pulse is weak and thready."

No! Not again, Kody thought as she raced to the dog's side. Blackie was a two year old Labrador Retriever. Kody had seen him not two months ago for his annual physical. He was a healthy, active young dog.

She quickly examined the panting black lab. He had large hematomas on both ears and was bleeding from his nose. His lungs sounded congested and he was struggling for every breath.

"Draw blood on him. I want a routine panel as well as a PT PTT and get a chest x-ray STAT!" Kody ordered as she inserted an IV into the dog's leg and got some fluid running. She wanted an open line in case she needed to resuscitate him. She placed an oxygen mask over his muzzle, trying to give the struggling animal some air.

The techs quickly went into action, carrying out Kody's instructions. Kody headed to the front lobby to talk to the owners. She found them alone in the waiting room.

Mrs. Quinn was bent over at the waist, her hands covering her face, sobbing uncontrollably. Her husband sat next to her patting her shoulder consolingly. He stood and stuck out his hand to Kody when he spotted her.

"Dr. Garrett."

Time was of the essence. She didn't waste any on pleasantries. "Tell me what happened to Blackie," Kody said.

"We're not sure what happened. He's been acting kind of funny for the last few days, really tired, not eating well, and not wanting to play with the kids. And that's his favorite thing, isn't it honey?" he asked his wife. She nodded and began to cry harder. "It's okay, honey. He's going to be okay... isn't he?" he asked, his eyes begging Kody for reassurance.

Kody's shoulders slumped a bit but she forced a neutral expression on her face. This was sounding ominously familiar. "We are still running tests. It's too soon to say what's wrong," Kody said. "What happened tonight? When he started bleeding?"

"I wasn't there. My wife called me at work. Honey, you need to tell the doctor what happened, so she can help Blackie."

Mrs. Quinn visibly fought to pull herself together. She looked up at Kody with anguished eyes. "Please don't let him die."

"I'll do every thing I can," Kody said. "Anything that you can tell me would help."

"Blackie's been coughing a little bit the past two days. It didn't seem like it was anything serious. I thought maybe he just had a bit of a cold and that was why he wasn't eating. I was in the kitchen making dinner when one of the kids started screaming. I ran into the family room. Blackie was coughing really hard, like he had something stuck in his throat. He seemed to be having trouble breathing, and then all the sudden, blood started to pour from his nose." Mrs. Quinn broke down and began to sob. "I should have brought him in sooner."

"Has he had any diarrhea or vomiting?" Mrs. Quinn shook her head. "Is it possible he got into something?" Kody continued to question the distraught woman. She needed as much information as she could get.

"Our yard borders the junior high school. Those damn kids are forever throwing stuff in our yard at Blackie when he barks at them, so it's possible," Mr. Quinn said. "I've spoken to the principal over there several times and he's never done anything about those little delinquents."

Mrs. Quinn pattered her husband's arm trying to calm him. "All that matters now is Blackie," she said.

"All right, if there is anything else you can think of let the receptionist know. I need to get back to Blackie. I'll come back out as soon as I know anything.

The couple nodded gratefully. Kody turned and quickly headed for the treatment room.

* * *

Kody went directly to the view box when she saw Blackie's x-ray had been hung. She immediately noticed an opacity in Blackie's lung on the film. Normally, she would assume pneumonia but with his other symptoms, she felt it was more than likely that it was blood. If what she suspected was wrong with Blackie was the case, she didn't have time to wait for the blood test to come back from the lab that would confirm her suspicion. She needed to act now.

"Andrea, get me a vial of Vitamin K, then see if any of our donor dogs are available just in case we need to give him a transfusion."

Andrea's eyes widened. She quickly realized what Dr. Garrett suspected. She hurried off to get what the doctor needed for Blackie.

Kody drew up an injection of Vitamin K, which was the antidote for rat poisoning. The chemical used to poison rodents interfered with the target animal's blood clotting factors, causing it to eventually bleed to death. Unfortunately, it had the same effect on any other animal that had the misfortune to ingest it. She stroked the distressed dog, then quickly injected him with the Vitamin K. Knowing she had done all she could for the moment, she headed out to the lobby to once again face the Quinns.

* * *

Kody stopped in the hall when she heard her name called. She turned to find the two animal control officers walking toward her. She had forgotten all about them.

"What's going on?" BJ asked. She had known something was wrong when Dr. Garrett rushed out of the office.

Kody sighed in frustration. "I think we've just had another poisoning, if that's what is going on. I just don't know for sure." She quickly explained to the two officers what had happened. "I'm going out to talk to the family now."

"Is the dog still alive?" Neil asked.

"Thankfully, yes. I've started him on Vitamin K. If it is rat poisoning, as I suspect, then he should show some improvement by morning. I had a PT PTT drawn on him. It won't be back from the lab until first thing tomorrow. We don't have the facilities to perform that type of test here. That will tell us for sure if his clotting factors are elevated as rat poison would do. I'll draw blood again tomorrow and have the test repeated. We should see some change in the clotting factors if the Vitamin K is working. While it's not conclusive proof that he was poisoned, unless I find something else that points to another cause, it's the closest we're going to get. As you know, there is no specific test for rat poison; it's diagnosed by process of elimination."

"All right, we'll check back with you on Monday to see what the lab results are," Neil said.

Kody nodded. She watched as the two walked away, her eyes unconsciously lingering on the muscled form of Officer Braden. When they disappeared from sight, she headed toward the lobby and the waiting Quinns.

* * *

Kody scrubbed her hands over her face. The meeting with the Quinns had not gone well. When Kody had explained her suspicions, Mr. Quinn had just about blown a gasket. He vowed to find the 'little bastards' who had done this and hang them out to dry. It had taken his wife quite some time to calm him down. Kody had quickly reiterated that she had no proof at this point, but was treating Blackie just in case.

She looked down at the black head resting comfortably on her thigh. "Hang in there, Blackie," she said as she stroked the dog's head. Her first real smile in hours graced her face when his tail thumped on the floor. He seemed to be holding his own and breathing more easily.

She looked up when she heard someone enter the treatment area. Kody smiled up at Tom. The short, slimly built

young man with shaggy black hair and round wire-rimmed glasses covering big brown eyes was one of her techs. He didn't work full time, but whenever they had a patient who needed 'round-the-clock care he would come in and spend the night in the clinic.

"Hey, Tom. How are you tonight?"

"I'm good, Dr. Garrett. How is this big guy doing?" Andrea had filled him in on what was happening when she called to request he work tonight.

"Much better than earlier, that's for sure."

She quickly gave the tech an update on the dog's condition. It was late and she had sent the other techs home over an hour ago. Andrea had volunteered to wait for Tom to arrive, but Kody had sent her on her way, wanting to stay with the dog for a bit longer.

"Thanks for coming in, Tom. I appreciate it."

"No problem. Where's your big guy?"

"Last time I looked he was snoring away in my office. In my next life, I want to come back as a dog," Kody said.

Tom laughed. "Go home and get some rest, Doctor G. I'll take good care of this guy. Don't you worry."

"I won't. I know he's in good hands. Have a good night, Tom, and call me immediately if there is any change. We do have one of our donor dogs and their owner standing by if needed."

Tom nodded, his attention already focused on Blackie.

Kody wearily made her way to her office. She woke up the big lump on the floor and headed for her truck.

This Ends the Excerpt

About The Author

RJ NOLAN lives in Southern California with her life partner. They share their home with their Great Dane. RJ has always been interested in storytelling. She has been actively writing for the last several years. You can contact RJ Nolan at her Web site: <http://rjnolan.com>.

Other Titles By This Author

Double Trouble - Lesbian: Romance

Summary

LITTLE DID KRIS know that the traditional first baseball game of the season played each April between the San Diego Padres and Los Angeles Dodgers would change her life. Tripping in front of the dark-haired Erin and caught ogling to boot, was only the preamble for the tall blonde, as both ended up splashed with beer in the stands and laughing good naturedly about the accident and clean-up. So begins what will be bound to open old wounds and make both women stronger as they find in each other a connection, and love, lust, trust, kids and trouble times two and more will decidedly make their relationship a rocky one but ultimately worth pursuing.

* * *

Thank You for Reading the Excerpt
All Gone

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