

Canicula

By Lorelei K. Hickman

Banshee split the night with her Carcharodon grin, her sly, sweet mouth promising all manner of cruelties, her eyes darkening to the color of hurricane skies, and Jared understood too late that following her into the shadow-strewn alleyway was the last mistake he would ever make in this world. Though his mind was smoothly rejecting the way her face had changed under the streetlight's glare, how the humanity had melted away in an instant to reveal something ancient and reptilian underneath, still there was no mistaking the glint of the blade she'd pulled from one steel-toed boot; the sharp silver tongue of death pointed straight at his heart.

"I don't need this," she told him, and her voice had gone low and sexless and cold, the voice of the thing inside her, not her own. "I could lay your throat open to the bone with my teeth and crack your vertebrae like sugar cubes if I wanted. But this way is so much cleaner..." She advanced on him, smiling, so many teeth in that rosepetal mouth, and

—and the dog was back again, barking its scruffy head off. Loud and insistent, the noise forced its way through Morgan's window and into his head, pulling him away from the dirty alley behind the Manhattan club where Banshee, his most popular character to date, had been about to take her latest victim. He sighed in frustration, ran impatient fingers through the dark snarl of his hair, and pushed his chair away from the computer screen. The pack of Camels on the windowsill beckoned to him, and after struggling briefly with his resolve, he reached for them, swearing softly at himself. He'd meant not to smoke another one until he'd finished the chapter he was working on, but it was just taking too damned long. The book was already more than three months overdue, and his agent had phoned that afternoon to tell him that the good people at Starke Publications were getting restless; the idea had been to get *Banshee's Lament* on the market in time for Halloween, the core audience would expect it, blah, blah, blah. He sighed again, tapped ash absently into the mostly empty Coke can on the desk beside the computer, and scowled at the screen. The series of vampire novels he'd written under the name Malachai D'art had allowed him to quit the shitty telemarketing and office-temp jobs for good, and to buy and restore the rambling Victorian house that he took such pride in. Dripping with purple prose, drenched with sex, blood, and rock and roll, the Banshee books sold well and had always been fun to write—until now. Now the words were coming slower every day, and he feared the well was beginning to run dry.

It didn't have *everything* to do with the noisy stray dog that kept trying to take up residence in his backyard, but it had enough. Enough of his time recently had been eaten up with trying to find the dog's owner, with posting flyers and combing the classifieds for lost pet ads that sounded right, and with doing all the other things Jo had suggested—or rather, *insisted*—that he do. While he understood her wanting to help the dog—she was a veterinarian, after all, and had devoted her life to that end—Jo's scientific background made it hard for her to understand the creative process and the fact that it demanded time and effort, just as her own work did. Sometimes he wondered if the two of them could ever really make things work between them

when her mind was so different from his; when he sensed that she felt—but would not come right out and say—that there were better, more important things he could be doing with his life.

He ground out his cigarette on the rim of the Coke can, dropped it inside, and immediately lit another. To hell with quitting; as usual, he'd picked a bad time to try. When the book was finished, he could try again, but until then he didn't need the extra stress. He'd been serious about it this time, too, he reflected ruefully. He'd even thrown out all his ashtrays. The deep unease he'd begun to feel over his worsening smoker's cough had added to his distractions as he vacillated between wanting to get it checked out and wanting to bury his head in the sand. At thirty-three, he told himself, he was too young to fall prey to the twin bogeymen of emphysema and lung cancer, but part of him—the part that took note of each new pain and clench in his chest when he woke every morning—remained unconvinced. He extinguished the second cigarette after one drag, its flavor gone bitter in his mouth, and went out on the porch to breathe the humid, magnolia-scented evening air instead.

The dog bounded joyfully across the yard upon seeing him, its tail a friendly blur, and Morgan couldn't help smiling and ruffling its coarse fur in spite of himself. He had nothing against dogs—he was dating a veterinarian, for Christ' sake—but he had no desire to own one, and it looked like that was the direction this situation was headed in. Jo had examined the mutt one night after they'd returned from seeing a play and had pronounced it a healthy male specimen—“as far as I can tell. Of course, he really should be tested for heartworms, but we can always do that at the clinic if you decide to keep him.” The look in her eyes when she'd said that had told him it would be difficult to tell her he'd decided anything else. It had occurred to him to suggest that she take the dog herself, but since she already shared her small studio apartment with two Dalmatians, three cats, and a rather obnoxious parrot, even he could see that wouldn't be a good idea.

A third possibility had entered his mind in the past week and refused to go away, distasteful though it was—he could take the dog to the pound. He wouldn't like doing that, but he couldn't continue to take halfhearted care of it, either. Its chance of finding a new home at the pound might not be great, but it *did* have a chance, and that was the best he felt capable of offering it. Jo should be able to understand that, but if need be, he could simply lie. He did that for a living, after all.

The animal shelter would be closed now, but he would take the dog there first thing in the morning, he decided, before he lost his resolve. Then maybe he could concentrate on Banshee again, and the rest of his life would fall back into place.

He went back inside, dumped a can of Alpo into a bowl, and brought it out to the dog, trying not to think of it as its last meal. He sat on the porch steps to watch it eat, absently lighting another cigarette as he thought about what he would say to Jo.

“You can't be serious.”

“Serious as a heart attack, Morgan.” He caught himself beginning to grind his teeth at hearing Desirea's favorite cliché for the millionth or billionth time and reminded himself that the woman

on the other end of the phone was now holding his career in the palm of her hand. And none too carefully, from what she was telling him. “Starke has bigger fish to fry than you. They don’t have to wait around forever for you to decide if you’re going to finish this book or not. Your contract is null and void.”

“They can’t do that,” Morgan protested dully. He didn’t have the energy for a stronger or smarter reply. He felt tired and low enough today without having to have this conversation with Desirea, who had never seemed to genuinely like him or his work. First there had been the bleak final solution of the animal shelter that morning, and the somehow reproachful looking the dog’s eyes as it was led away; next had come Jo’s skeptical face—her jury face, as he thought of it—when he told her that the dog had simply stopped coming around. At least she hadn’t suggested that he go out looking for it.

And now this.

“The subject’s closed, I’m afraid.” He could hear the brief, liquid pause through the phone as Desirea swallowed something—probably one of her loathsome mint juleps—and, faintly in the background, the tinkle of china and Muzak. “There are hundreds of people writing about the same things as you, Morgan. We’ll just publish one of those books instead.”

“Who’s “we”? Listen, Des , you’re supposed to work for me, not the other—”

But she had hung up.

“Fuck.” He stared at the phone in his hand, then at the computer monitor, not seeing either one; seeing instead the pained expression Desirea would wear when she was reading something she found unworthy of her time. He’d seen that look on her face a lot, though never when she was looking at a check for her percentage of his royalties. He tried to tell himself he would be better off without such hypocritical representation, but one thing she’d said had hit a nerve. The market *was* flooded, to such a degree that many publishing houses wouldn’t touch vampire fiction with a ten-foot stake. But Desirea had somehow gotten his work to sell.

Would it still?

He lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply, and was immediately seized with a painful fit of coughing. It felt as if his lungs were full of ground glass, and he could taste blood at the back of his throat, briny and strong, like a mouthful of seawater and pennies. He staggered into the bathroom, where he dropped the cigarette into the toilet and spat copiously after it, then rinsed his mouth with a handful of cold tap water. The blood was ominously thick and dark, and for a long moment Morgan could not look away from it. His reflection in the mirror startled him when he finally lifted his head; his face was drawn, his eyes wild and scared. He swore and turned off the bathroom light, then returned to the desk and shredded the rest of the Camels over the wastebasket. He’d been smoking them since he was fifteen—more than half his life, he realized now with mild amazement. They were practically a part of him. And now he wanted never to raise another one to his lips. This wasn’t like all the other times he’d thought about quitting. This time he had done it, just like that.

He only hoped it wasn't too late.

"I have your X-rays here, Mr. Davis." The doctor's voice was neutral, professionally detached, giving nothing away, and Morgan found himself searching the man's face for clues to what he was about to say. Jo squeezed his hand, her touch at once apprehensive and reassuring, and he squeezed back, touched that she had taken the time to come with him, to ensure that he kept the appointment. Whatever their differences, it seemed that she cared for him more than he'd believed before today. He could see it in her eyes as she, too, waited for the doctor to go on.

"There *is* something here that concerns me. I'll show you what I mean." The doctor opened the plain brown envelope he held and drew out the ghostly black and blue images taken less than an hour before. He placed one on the viewer and flipped on the light, and immediately Morgan felt a paralyzing chill, as if there was an ice cube lodged in his throat.

There was no need for the doctor to point anything out. The shadows on his lungs—two on the right and one on the left—were dark and distinct, the shape and size of silver dollars, and as Morgan stared at them, he saw the two ways his life could end. One was in a hospital bed, attached to a machine that would breathe for him until even that was no longer enough; the other was with a bullet in his brain when the pain became too much to stand.

The problem was, he didn't own a gun. Yet.

"Now, this isn't necessarily as bad as it looks," the doctor said hastily, noticing the expression on Morgan's face (and on Jo's? He couldn't look at her to be sure). "I'd like to order some tests, some bloodwork, to help rule some things out. And I'm going to recommend a biopsy of the lung tissue—"

"I'm not going through all that," Morgan said flatly. "I don't care about the specifics. It's cancer. That's all I need to know."

"But you *don't* know it, Morgan." Jo was squeezing his hand again, tighter this time. "An X-ray is almost never the whole story. Believe me; I see that every day. There are other things this can be."

"She's right, Mr. Davis. And besides that, it's only through knowing the specifics, as you put it, that we can formulate a treatment plan for you, regardless of whether this is cancer we're dealing with or not."

Morgan stopped listening. He nodded at the appropriate times; he rolled up his sleeve and allowed a nurse to draw his blood and prepare it for shipment to a lab; he wrote down the date he was to check into the hospital for the biopsy, knowing he would never need that scrap of information. He held Jo's hand and wondered if he would finish his book before he died.

And strangely, he thought of the dog he'd probably sent to its own death the day before. He wondered if it had been as scared as he was now...or if it had had as many regrets.

“Wouldn't you like a little dinner with your wine?” Jo asked softly as he began to pour his fourth glass. She'd invited herself to spend the night (“there's no way in hell you can be alone tonight, Morgan”) and had made a lasagne, a labor of—if not love—then surely of caring and concern that he was utterly incapable of appreciating. His portion sat untouched on his plate, oozing tomato sauce like blood. He upended the bottle of Merlot over his glass to drain out the last few drops and eyed the wine rack in the corner of the dining room. Plenty more where that came from.

Jo sighed and laid down her fork. “Talk to me, Morgan. Tell me why you're so eager to sign your own death warrant.”

“Oh, I think that's already been done for me pretty nicely,” he muttered darkly, taking another swallow of wine. But as he lowered his glass back to the table, his eyes fell on the nicotine stain that spread across the tips of his first two fingers. He'd been the one doing it all along, had he not?

Jo twisted her napkin in frustration. “A shadow on an X-ray can be *anything*, Morgan. It could just be bad radiology technique.”

“Mmm. Yeah, and bad radiology technique is what's making me cough up blood, too, I suppose.”

Jo's face paled a shade under the warm light of the mock-Tiffany lamps. “You didn't tell me you'd been coughing up blood.”

He drained his wineglass again. “Yeah.” It had happened again before they'd even left the medical center; he'd ducked into a men's room and pressed a wad of paper towels to his mouth to muffle the sounds, then waited for the nausea to subside when he brought them away wet enough to drip onto the tiles.

“That's serious, Morgan.”

He laughed briefly. “No shit.”

“You have *got* to go in for that biopsy, Morgan, you can't just—” “Jo. Please.” Mercifully, something in his voice made her stop. “I don't want to know what my life expectancy is. I don't want to get lured into fighting a losing battle. And I *don't* want to talk about it.”

She was quiet for a moment, appearing to mull it over. Then she said, “And I'm just supposed to stand back and watch you do this to yourself?”

“You don't have to watch. Go if you want. I'll understand.” He massaged his temples with his nicotine-stained fingers. The wine was giving him a headache. “But stop trying to change my mind.”

At least five full minutes passed before Jo spoke again. “I’ll stay, Morgan. But I don’t know for how long.”

Later, much later, Morgan lay stretched out on his side in bed next to Jo, watching her sleep, wishing dully that he could drift off completely as well, but he was stuck in a semiwakeful, semidrunken state that showed no sign of abating. He had lain like this, unmoving, for what felt like hours already, ever since Jo had tried gamely to make love to him, failed, and turned away. He had succeeded in numbing his body and mind enough so that he was not thinking or feeling much of anything, merely watching the shadows creep slowly across the room and across Jo’s slumbering form. Perhaps he had slept briefly at one point, but it was as if some part of him was shying away from the oblivion the rest of him wanted so badly.

Dimly, he noticed that his eyes were feeling dry and gritty, and he closed them for a few minutes, for a change of pace. That was when the barking began.

Morgan’s eyes snapped open again so abruptly that the effect was disorienting—for several seconds he could have sworn that the room looked different somehow, but he couldn’t have said why. Likewise, he couldn’t have said why he was certain that the dog he was hearing outside barking at the moon was the same one he had carted off to the pound—it didn’t even really sound the same. This dog’s bark had a different timbre and echoed oddly across the yard, as if it was coming from far away. And besides, there was no straying away from where that dog had gone.

Even so, he knew it was the same dog.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake,” he muttered aloud as he sat up, his head throbbing weakly in protest. “It is *not*. Go take a look.”

Jo sighed and murmured something unintelligible, her voice thick with sleep, as he slid out of bed and drew on his jeans, fumbling groggily with the button fly. “It’s okay, Jo, it’s just another—”

Jo rolled over, her eyes shining in the moonlight, and said in a clipped, unnatural monotone, “Tell me why you’re so eager to sign your own death warrant, Morgan.”

For an instant he stood frozen in startled silence, then cursed as he felt his arms breaking out in sobering gooseflesh. “Goddamn it, Jo, I don’t need—”

But then he realized she had spoken in her sleep. She was reliving their earlier conversation, that was all; maybe dreaming of a different response from him. Funny, he’d never known her to sleep-talk before.

The dog’s weird bark sounded again. “I don’t need *you* spooking me right now,” he finished under his breath. He peered out the window to see if he could see the dog from where he was, but he could not. *Come on then*, he thought. *Maybe this one’ll have a collar or a fucking microchip or something, and you can get it home and do a good deed before you kick off. Balance the*

scales. Hey-ho, let's go. He got himself moving, out of the room and down the stairs, across the foyer and out onto the porch, where the damp and chilly pre-dawn air brought the gooseflesh back with a vengeance. Why hadn't he put on a shirt?

He couldn't pinpoint the direction the barking was coming from, and there was still no dog in sight. Without really knowing that he meant to, Morgan drew a deep breath and whistled sharply, which brought on another paroxysm of coughing...but which also brought the dog.

The dog..bounding joyfully across the yard towards him, just as it had done before, its exuberance unmitigated by the fact that it was dead, dead and...autopsied?—its body cavities split open and trailing dissected organs behind it as it ran with a boneless, flopping gait. As it got closer, he could see the fat syringe that dangled from its foreleg like an obscene parody of a junkie's last fix, and he leaned over the porch railing and vomited wine and blood and bitter bile into the shrubbery. *oh jesus*, his mind gibbered. *why'd you have to call it, now it's gonna jump on you and lick your face, and its tongue is gonna be COLD and you can't run because you can't even BREATHE—*

—all of which was bad enough, but when this very thing happened a second later, something else happened that Morgan hadn't anticipated. The dog's sawed-open ribcage gaped wide enough to spill its heart at Morgan's feet with a wet and horribly distinct *plop*; a heart that had been neatly sliced in two to display the hundreds of long white worms threaded through the muscle and the valves, still tunneling, boring, *eating*—

—and that was when he finally wrenched himself free of the nightmare, choking and sobbing, to find that his pillowcase had turned red in the morning light, and at some point, Jo had gone.

Except she hadn't really gone. He found her downstairs in the kitchen, drinking coffee and poring over one of her thick, intimidating veterinary textbooks. Several more were spread across the table, which meant she was obviously researching some arcane subject, and so he tried to sidle past her to get coffee of his own without disturbing her. It didn't work; as soon as she glanced up at him, fresh alarm registered on her face and her reading was apparently forgotten.

“My god, Morgan, you look awful. Your *eyes*...you never slept, did you?”

“Well, yeah, unfortunately I did.” He poured a dollop of cream into his coffee and watched a moment, as he always did, as the blackness and the whiteness swirled together and became one. “Had just about the most vivid fucking nightmare of my life.” He shuddered, remembering the repulsive feel of the dog's tongue against his skin, the meat-locker chill and the dead scent of its flayed flesh, and he sat down heavily at the table, not quite trusting his legs to support him.

“Well, I can't say I'm surprised.” Jo paused and looked thoughtful for a moment as she sipped her coffee. “You know, if you wanted...I could write you a prescription for some Valium or something; we use it for dogs all the time. We'd just say you've got a dog that's terrified of thunderstorms.”

Morgan looked askance at her. “Can't you lose your license for that?”

“Not if you don’t tell them it’s really for you.”

He spared her a wry smile in spite of himself. “Thanks. I’ll keep it in mind.”

She continued to gaze at him for a long moment, and he could sense her wanting to say something else. He dropped his eyes to her scatter of textbooks and began paging through one at random, looking for a way to change the subject. He passed an illustration of a dog’s brain showing the effects of rabies on the central nervous system. *Perception and instinct become severely impaired*, read the caption. “Jo...do you think animals have...spirits or souls?”

“Well...I can’t really say for sure, but I don’t think it’s any less—or more—likely than it is for humans to have them.”

“So you’ve never seen anything that made you think one way or the other? I mean...”

“Well, I’ve seen my fair share of death, if that’s what you mean. I’ve had animals die in my arms, and I’ve helped some of them do it that needed to. And, no—so far I’ve never felt or sensed the passing of a soul. But I don’t necessarily assume that I never will.”

Morgan flipped a few more pages, still not looking at her. “Do you ever have a problem with doing that?”

“With putting them to sleep? Yeah, sure I do. No one likes that part of the job. But sometimes it’s for the best. If I didn’t believe that, I couldn’t be in this profession.” She paused. “Why do you ask? I mean, you never seemed to want to know much about what I do before.”

Morgan drained his mug and shrugged slightly. “Well, maybe I should’ve.” He turned another page and found himself looking at a glossy photo of a bifurcated heart full of worms, identical to the last image in his dream, and he slapped the book shut so abruptly that Jo jumped in her chair. Then he noticed the title embossed on the cover: *Communicable Diseases Common To Man And Animals*. He stared at it dumbly, unwilling to let it completely sink in.

“Morgan, what’s the matter?”

“This book...” he cleared his throat. “ ‘Diseases Common to Man and Animals’ ?”

“What about it?”

“This picture...” He thumbed through the pages again until he found it. “Now, I didn’t go to vet school, but those *are* heartworms, aren’t they?”

Jo nodded. “Nasty, aren’t they?”

“People can get them?”

“Well, yeah. We’ve got hearts, don’t we? Though it’s actually the lungs that are affected first—” Suddenly she gasped. “Morgan, you don’t think this is what you have, do you? Human cases are extremely rare, and—”

“How rare?”

“There’ve been less than a hundred documented cases, which is really—”

“Doesn’t sound that rare to me.” He began skimming the chapter from the beginning. *The life cycle of the heartworm requires an arthropod host, usually a mosquito, which later becomes the vector by which the parasite is spread from animal to animal, or from animal to man*, he read. “There are plenty of mosquitoes around here, Jo.” He paused. “How do you treat this?”

Jo sighed. “With dogs, we use arsenic.”

“Arsenic?”

“Yes, an organic form of arsenic. But Morgan, even the few human cases of heartworm disease that have been discovered—and it really is a few, compared to the number of dogs—even those never progressed to the stage of being symptomatic. They were discovered by *accident*. We’re not a natural host for the worm. Our bodies usually kill them.”

“ ‘Usually’ ?”

Jo stood up abruptly. “Well, I can see you’re not hearing me.” She sounded exasperated. “I’ve got to go to work, anyway.” She began collecting her books and shoving them into her satchel. Morgan pulled the communicable diseases book out of her reach.

“Can I borrow this?”

Jo chewed her lower lip. “I should say no. You’ve already got yourself convinced you’re heartworm-positive.”

“Then what harm can it do to let me read about it?”

She sighed again. “None, I suppose.” She reached out and smoothed back his hair with a small smile. “Maybe you’ll go and have that biopsy just to prove me wrong.” She kissed his forehead lightly and headed for the door.

“Don’t hold your breath,” he whispered to her back.

The word processor’s cursor blinked steadily at him, ticking off the seconds as it waited for him to continue typing. It had been doing that for a long time now.

Banshee and Jared were still in the alley behind the Manhattan nightclub, facing each other like the predator and prey that they were. He knew what was going to happen next; he’d written

scenes like this so many times before. But this one was probably going to be the last, and he had to make it count for something. It had to be a fitting swan song for a pulp horror writer, and so for hours now he'd been wracking his brain to think of new ways to describe the flash of fangs, the spurt and splash of blood, the sights and sounds and scents of death.

why not just write down your dream

“Stop it,” he said aloud. He shook his head and took a swallow from the bottle of Absolut which stood open beside the computer. Wine was no longer strong enough or fast enough to shut off the parts of his mind that needed shutting off, but maybe vodka was. He would find out.

She advanced on him, smiling, so many teeth in that rosepetal mouth, and

...in a few instances, heartworms have been reported in people as small nodules in the lungs...such human cases are considered biological oddities...

“STOP it,” he growled at himself. “Will you just fucking concentrate already?” He slapped his forehead hard enough to hurt and stared even harder at the screen, though its brightness was beginning to make him squint.

...so many teeth in that rosepetal mouth, and the first flash of her knife caught him across the forehead, opening his brow to the bone. A freshet of blood poured into his eyes, and he knew then that she meant to play with him first, so

...in acute cases observed in dogs, pulmonary infarctions and obstruction of the inferior vena cava have resulted in sudden death...

....sudden death....

A half-scream born of frustration and panic leapt from Morgan's throat as he lunged at the computer and knocked it to the floor. It was no use; he'd been unable to write before he'd known his days were numbered, and he sure as hell couldn't write now. Banshee would die with him, and probably when he was least prepared for it...unless he did something soon.

An idea had begun to take shape in his mind after his conversation with Jo that morning. He rescued the vodka bottle from amongst the wreckage of the computer monitor—only about half of it had spilled—drank deeply, and picked up the phone to call her at work and ask her to keep him company one more time.

He made a special effort to appear in good spirits throughout the evening, and made a point of telling Jo that he'd actually rethought his position on the whole biopsy issue. He took a brief moment of pleasure in seeing her eyes shine with relief, before the thought that he'd have made a better actor than a writer caused a crack in his artificial smile.

They ordered Thai food, washed it down with lots of sweet red wine, and watched old movies on cable until the smallest hours of the morning, when Jo finally fell asleep. If she had noticed the absence of his computer monitor, she'd never mentioned it.

He held her for a few moments, until he felt tears beginning to pool in the corners of his eyes, then gently extricated himself from her embrace. The wine did its job, and she didn't wake.

He went to the desk and wrote her a letter that bared his soul, then one to his treacherous agent Desirea that bared his fangs, and left them there in sealed envelopes with their names on each. Then he picked up Jo's purse from the coffee table and hunted through it until he found her car keys.

He'd known about the emergency kit Jo kept in her car since the day they'd met nearly two years ago. It contained everything she could possibly need to help stray or injured animals she encountered on the road—everything from bandages, sutures, and antiseptic to muzzles, sedatives...and euthanasia solution. She even kept a few syringes on hand. It didn't take him long to find everything he needed.

He'd already decided he wasn't going to do it in the house. He would not burden Jo with the discovery of his body. He got into his own car and drove, not noticing or caring which way he went, until he reached the outskirts of town, then took his hands off the wheel and let the car run itself off the road. Then he sat there for a very long time.

The euthanasia solution was called Fatal-Plus, a name that he would have once found funny in a morbid sort of way. He gathered from reading the rest of the label that it was supposed to be three times as toxic, dose for dose, as what was necessary to kill an animal of any given weight—and there was even a convenient milliliter-to-pound ratio printed on one side.

“How thoughtful,” he muttered. He calculated briefly, then began drawing up the right amount. It was thicker and more viscous than he had imagined, like syrup, and he hesitated for a moment at the thought of having to force that substance into his veins. He'd never injected himself with *anything* before. What if he couldn't finish the job now? Then he thought about the shadows on his X-rays and the textbook photo of the heart full of worms. He imagined his own tissues riddled with the vile creatures, eating him alive from the inside out, and he thought he could feel a slithering, tickling sensation deep within his chest. He drew up the rest of the solution in a hurry.

Jo had had a rubber tourniquet in her emergency kit, too. Before he could think about it too much more, he fastened it around his arm and pulled it tight, then held his breath and sank the needle in.

And as his vision began to fade, he thought he heard a familiar barking sound far away...but getting closer.

Coming for him at last.