

Friday Snippets: From the Ghost Files

written by Holly

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By Holly Lisle

I'm at a point where I really can't post any more of the Moonroads book, at least not for a while. But I still want to do Friday Snippets.

So I figured for your amusement and edification, I'd post snippets from the stuff I've had rejected but that I still intend to keep trying to sell, albeit perhaps in a different genre or in a highly revised version.

This stuff may NEVER see print. I hope it does, but I acknowledge that you may be reading ghosts. However, in case I ever can find the right market for these stories, please don't repost, quote or copy the following excerpt. It is copyrighted and not yet abandoned. Hope remains.

BLACK DOG

Chapter One

Out of the corner of her eye, Natalie Hammond caught a glimpse of something moving with her through the snowy woods. Just off to her right, on the other side of the brush. Something big. Something dark. She stopped, hand on the pepper gas canister in her coat pocket, and turned, ready to confront whatever it was. But looking directly at the brush,

she could see that nothing was there. Nothing. And still the hair stood up on the back of her neck.

Natalie turned slowly in a full circle, scanning the terrain. The stream bed beside her. Her tracks along the path leading back to the rental cabin and the lake, both out of sight. Woods all around her, the mountains of north Georgia steep but not rugged, tree-covered but – because everything in early March the ground was still covered by snow and all those trees were bare – with decent visibility.

Natalie could see well enough in all directions, and all she could see was that she was alone.

Still, her pulse raced, and her mouth dried out, and she could not force herself to let go of the pepper spray. Her eyes told her she was alone. But her gut insisted something watched her. From nearby.

Dammit.

Natalie took a long, slow, deep breath and tried to slow her skittering heartbeat. She'd been in the city too long. Raleigh always had something going on, Natalie always had friends and colleagues around, and this sort of silence simply wasn't a part of her life. She was alone. She could see that. She wasn't being watched; she wasn't being followed. Her mind, used to the constant press of people, was manufacturing shadows.

But just to be sure, she walked through the layer of snow to the place where she'd thought she saw movement. The snow there was pristine. No footprints. No trails.

She sighed, forced her hand to let go of the pepper spray, and, just to kick her day back onto its planned track, she took a picture of the woods with her digital camera. It was nothing spectacular, but maybe the team would find a use for a shot of underbrush and unbroken snow.

She returned to the faint path she'd been following, breathed in the cold, crisp air, and finally felt like she was getting back under control. She stood quietly for a moment and listened. The waterfall sounded nearer, and she was hoping that she'd be able to reach it in time to get some good shots of it before she lost her light. She checked her watch. Just past noon. She should have plenty of time to get the pictures, then make the hike back to the cabin. And if she decided to be really ambitious, she load all the photos onto the laptop, put them into some sort of format, suggest a possible storyline, and e-mail the whole thing to the team.

Natalie would bet money she wasn't going to be feeling ambitious, though.

She thought of PirateBox, of her friends back in Raleigh researching conspiracy theories and bouncing ideas off each other at a hundred miles a minute and creating wild stories that they then turned into award-winning video games – and she could be proud of everything she and her colleagues had accomplished together. She loved all of them. She loved seeing the joy they got from doing what they did. But she couldn't feel that hunger inside herself anymore. She didn't know when she'd lost it, but her own fire was gone.

She trudged beside the stream bed, getting nice shots of boulders and overhangs, doing what she'd told the team she was going to do. Wondering if, when she had to leave this haven, she would be able to go back to her old life. Natalie had reached her mid-thirties with a great career and wonderful friends, and she was one of the tiny percentage of people on the planet who could honestly say that she was living her dreams.

She wondered how many of those others found themselves probing their dreams like an aching tooth, wondering if what they had was really all there was –

She froze.

Across the stream bed, from the corner of her eye she caught flash of glowing ruby, a shadow slinking forward. Something as big as a man crouched over, as big as a calf – something bulky, and fast. She jumped and turned in a single movement, the pepper-spray canister in her hand, her index finger on the trigger.

Again, nothing.

I'll post continuing excerpts from this for the next few weeks.

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