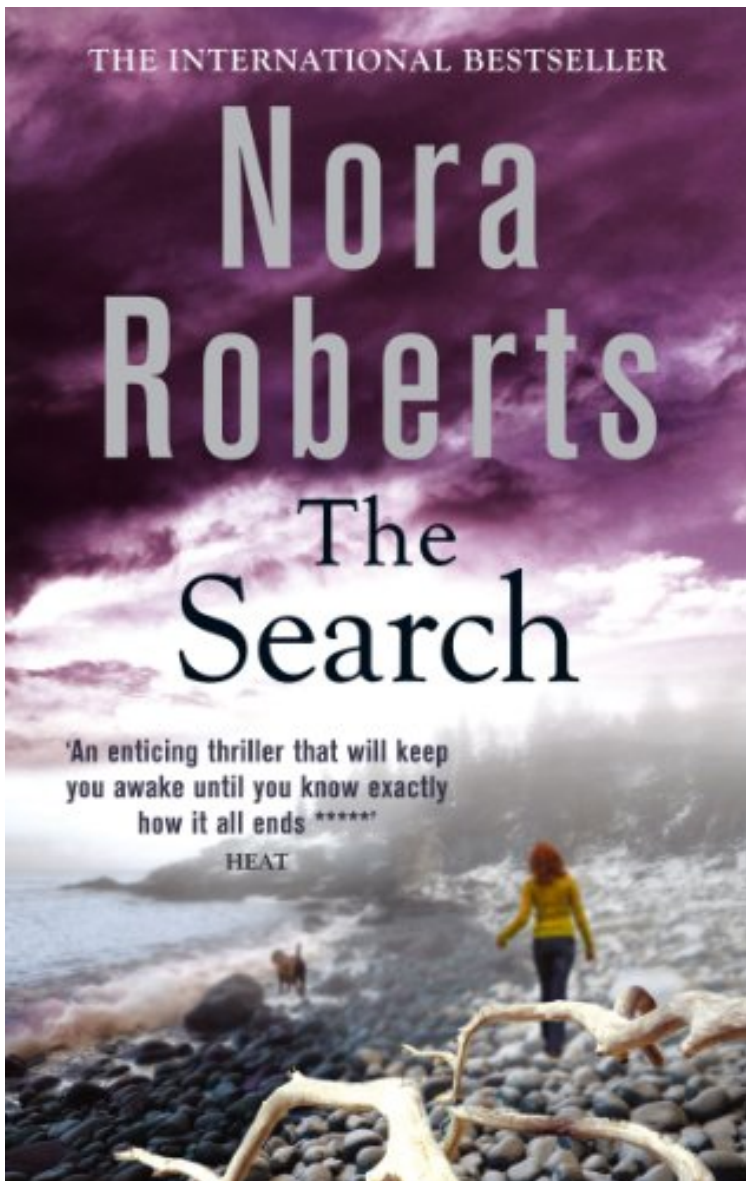


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## The Search (English Edition)



*Par Nora Roberts*  
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### Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIt's been a few years since Fiona Bristow moved to Orcas Island to rebuild her life. Within the small, tight-knit island community she's built up a canine rescue centre that trains dogs to track missing persons in Washington's vast wilderness. Other than her work, Fiona wants to be left alone. Romantic entanglements are very far down on her list - and certainly not with Simon Doyle, an artist newly arrived from the mainland. Simon doesn't know that Fiona harbours a terrible secret, and that her past still puts them both in very real danger . . .ExtraitPART ONEProperly trained, a man can be a dogs best friend.COREY FORD ONEOn a chilly morning in February with a misty rain shuttering the windows,

Devin and Rosie Cauldwell made slow, sleepy love. It was day three of their weeks vacation and month two of their attempt to conceive a second child. Their three-year-old son, Hugh, was the result of a long weekend on Orcas Island in the San Juans and Rosie was convinced a rainy afternoon and a bottle of Pinot Noir. They hoped to repeat their success with a return visit to Orcas, and happily applied themselves to the mission at hand while their toddler slept with his beloved Wubby in the next room. It was too early in the day for wine, but Rosie took the quiet rain as an omen. When they were snuggled up together, loose and warm from sex, she smiled. Who had the best idea ever? Devin gave her ass an easy squeeze. You did. Hang on, because I just had another one. I think I need a few minutes, first. She laughed, rolled and propped herself on his chest to grin at him. Get your mind off sex, Sleazy. I think I need a few minutes for that, too. Pancakes. We need pancakes. Rainy morning, our cozy little house. Definitely calls for pancakes. He squinted at her. Whos making them? Let the fates decide. She scooted up, and in a long-standing Cauldwell family tradition they let the balance hang on Rock, Paper, Scissors best two out of three. Damn it, she muttered when he crushed her scissors with his rock. Superior skill wins out. My ass. But fairs fair and I have to pee anyway. She bent down to give him a smacking kiss, then jumped out of bed. I love vacation, she said as she dashed into the bathroom. She especially loved this vacation, she thought, with her two handsome men. If the rain kept up, or got heavier, theyd play games inside. But if it let up, maybe theyd strap Hugh in the carrier and take a bike ride, or just go for a long hike. Hugh just loved it here, loved the birds, the lake, the deer theyd spotted and of course the rabbits all brothers to his faithful Wubby. And maybe hed have a brother of his own in the fall. She was ovulating not that she was obsessing about getting pregnant. But counting days wasnt obsessing, she thought as she caught her sleep- and sex-mussed hair back in a band. It was just being self-aware. She grabbed a sweatshirt and some flannel pants, glanced back at Devin, whod gone back to snoozing. She really thought theyd hit the money shot. Delighted with the idea, she pulled on heavy socks, then glanced at the watch shed left on the dresser. Gosh, its after eight. We mustve worn Hugh out last night for him to sleep this late. Probably the rain, Devin mumbled. Yeah, probably. Still, she turned out of their room for his, as she did every morning, at home or away. She moved quietly, content to let him sleep a bonus if she could grab her first cup of coffee before she heard the first Mommy of the day. She peeked in, expecting to find him curled up with his stuffed bunny. The empty bed didnt bring panic. He mightve gotten up to pee, just as she had. Hed gotten so good with his potty training. Even when she didnt find him in the little bathroom off the hall, she didnt panic. Since he was habitually an early riser, theyd encouraged him to play for a bit before waking them. She usually heard him, talking to his toys or running his cars, but shed been a little distracted having vacation sex. God, she thought as she started downstairs, what if hed looked in when they were doing it? No, hed have walked right in and asked what game they were playing. With a half laugh, she turned into the pretty living room, expecting to see her little boy on the floor surrounded by the toys of his choice. When she didnt, the first fingers of unease tickled up her throat. She called his name, moving quickly now, sliding a little on the hardwood floors in her socks. Panic struck, a knife in the belly. The kitchen door stood wide open. SHORTLY AFTER NINE, Fiona Bristow pulled up at the pretty vacation house in the heart of Moran State Park. Rain fizzed along the ground more than pattered, but its steadiness promised sloppy tracking. She signaled her partner to stay in the truck, then got out to approach one of the local deputies. Davey. Hey, Fee. You got here fast. I didnt have far to go. The others are on their way. Are we using the house for base camp or do you want us to set up? Were using it. Youll want to talk to the parents, but Ill give you the basics. Hugh Cauldwell, age three, blond and blue. Last seen wearing SpiderMan pajamas. Fiona saw his mouth tighten a little. Davey had a boy about the same age as Hugh, and she imagined he had a pair of Spider-Man pjs, too. The mother first noticed he was missing at about eight-fifteen, Davey continued. Found the back door open. No visible signs of forced entry or an intruder. The mother alerted the father. They called it in right away, and they ran around, calling for him, looking in the immediate area. And tracked up the place, Fiona mused. But who could blame them? We did a house-and-grounds search, to make sure he wasnt just hiding. Davey turned back to Fiona with rain dripping off the bill of his cap. Hes not in the house, and his mother says he has his stuffed bunny with him. He sleeps with it, carts it around habitually. Weve got rangers on the search, McMahan and Matt are out there, he added, referring to the sheriff and a young deputy. McMahan cleared me to call in your unit, and assigned me to base. Well set up and get started. Id like to interview the parents now, if thats good for you. He gestured toward the house. Theyre scared, as youd expect and they want to go out and look for him. You might help me talk them down from that. Ill see what I can do. Thinking of that, she went back to the truck, opened the door for her partner. Peck hopped out and walked with her and Davey to the house. At Daveys nod, Fiona

crossed to the couple, who rose from their huddle on the couch. The woman clutched a little red fire engine. Mr. and Mrs. Cauldwell, Im Fiona Bristow with Canine Search and Rescue. This is Peck. She laid a hand on the head of the chocolate Lab. The rest of my units on the way. Were going to help look for Hugh. You need to go. You need to go right now. Hes only three. Yes, maam. The rest of my unit will be here any minute. It would help us if I get some information first. We told the police and the rangers everything. Devin looked toward the window. I need to go out there, look for him. Were wasting time here. Believe me, Mr. Cauldwell, the police and the rangers are doing everything they can to find Hugh. They called us because finding him is everyones priority. Were trained, and your little boy is our only focus now. Were going to coordinate with the police and the park rangers. I need to make sure I have all the information so we optimize our resources. You realized Hugh was missing about eight-fifteen, is that right? Tears swam fresh into Rosies eyes. I shouldve checked on him earlier. He hardly ever sleeps past seven. I shouldve Mrs. Cauldwell . . . Rosie, Fiona corrected, using the first name to comfort. You dont want to blame yourself. Little boys are curious, arent they? Has Hugh ever left the house by himself before? Never, never. I thought hed come down to play, then I couldnt find him, and I went back to the kitchen. And the door . . . the door was open. Wide open. And I couldnt find him. Maybe you could show me. Fiona signaled to Peck to follow. Hes wearing his pajamas? Spider-Man. Hell be cold, and wet, and scared. Her shoulders shook as they moved back to the kitchen. I dont understand what you can do that the police cant. Were another resource, and Peck? Hes trained for this. Hes been on dozens of searches. Rosie swiped tears off her cheeks. Hugh likes dogs. He likes animals. If the dog barks, maybe Hugh will hear and come back. Fiona said nothing, but opened the back door, then squatted down to take in the view from the level of a three-year-old boy. Likes animals. I bet you can see a lot of wildlife around here. Deer, fox, rabbits. Yes. Yes. Its so different from Seattle. He loves watching out the windows, or from the deck. And weve taken hikes and bike rides. Is Hugh shy? No. Oh no, hes adventurous and sociable. Fearless. Oh God. Instinctively Fiona put an arm around Rosies shaking shoulders. Rosie, Im going to set up here in the kitchen, if thats okay. What I need you to do is to get me five things Hugh wore recently. Yesterdays socks, underwear, shirt, like that. Five small items of clothing. Try not to handle them. Put them in these. Fiona took plastic bags from her kit. Were a unit of five. Five handlers, five dogs. Well each use something of Hughs to give the dogs his scent. They . . . they track him? Easier to agree than to try to explain air-scenting, scent cones, skin rafts. The boy had already been gone more than an hour. Thats right. Does he have a favorite treat? Something he likes especially, something you might give him when hes been good? You mean like . . . Pushing at her hair, Rosie looked around blankly. He loves gummy worms. Great. Do you have any? I . . . yes. If you could get the clothes and the worms, Fiona said with a smile. Im going to set up. I hear my unit, so Im going to set up. Okay. Okay. Please . . . Hes just three. Rosie dashed out. Fiona shared a brief look with Peck, then began to set up operations. As her team came in, human and canine, she briefed them and began to assign search sectors while poring over her maps. She knew the area, and knew it well. A paradise, she thought, for those looking for serenity, scenery, an escape from streets and traffic, buildings, crowds. And for a lost little boy, a world filled with hazards. Creeks, lakes, rocks. More than thirty miles of foot trails, she thought, over five thousand acres of forest to swallow up a three-year-old and his stuffed rabbit. Weve got a heavy drizzle, so well keep the search grids close and cover this area. As field OL operational leader Fiona outlined their sections on the map while Davey listed data on a large whiteboard. Well overlap some with the other teams, but lets keep good communications so we dont step on our own feet. Hes going to be wet and chilled by now. Meg Greene, mother of two and recent grandmother, looked at her husband, Chuck. Poor little guy. And a kid that age? Hes got no sense of direction. Hell wander anywhere. James Hutton frowned as he checked his radio. He might tire out, just curl up and sleep. Lori Dyson nodded toward her German shepherd, Pip. He might not hear the searchers calling for him, but our guys will sniff him out. Thats the plan. Everyone has their coordinates? Radios checked, packs checked? Make sure you set your compass bearings. With Mai in emergency surgery, Daveys solo base OL, so well check in with him as we cover our sectors. She stopped as the Cauldwells came back in. I have . . . Rosies chin wobbled. I have what you asked for. Thats great. Fiona crossed to her, then laid her hands on the terrified mothers shoulders. You hold good thoughts. Everyone out there has only one thing to do, one thing on their mind: find Hugh and bring him home. She took the bags, passed them out to her unit. Okay, lets go get him. With the others, she walked outside, hitched on her pack. Peck stood by her side, the slight quiver in his body the only sign he was anxious to get started. She and the others spread out to take their assigned sectors, and like the rest of her unit, she set her compass bearing. She opened the bag holding a little sock, offered it to Pecks nose. This is Hugh. Its Hugh. Hughs just a little boy,

Peck. This is Hugh. He sniffed enthusiastically a dog who knew his job. He glanced up at her, sniffed again, then looked deep into her eyes, body quivering as if to say, Okay, I've got it! Let's move! Find Hugh. She added her hand signal, and Peck lifted his nose in the air. Let's find Hugh! She waited, watching him scent and circle, let him take the lead as he prowled and paced. The thin, steady rain posed an obstacle, but Peck worked well in the rain. She remained where she was, giving him verbal encouragement as he tracked the air and the wet pattered on the bright yellow of her wind-breaker. When he moved east, she followed him into the thickening trees. At five, Peck was a vet, a seventy-pound chocolate Lab, strong, smart and tireless. He would, Fiona knew, search for hours in any conditions, over any terrain, for the living or for the dead. She had only to ask it of him. Together, they moved through deep forest, over ground soft and soggy with needles shed from the towering Douglas firs and old-growth cedars, over and around clumps of mushrooms and nurse logs coated with rich green moss, through brambles edgy with thorn. While they searched, Fiona kept an eye on her partner's body language, made note of landmarks, checked her compass. Every few minutes, Peck glanced back to let her know he was on the case. Find Hugh. Let's find Hugh, Peck. He alerted, showing interest in a patch of ground around a nurse log. Got something, do you? That's good. Good boy. She flagged the alert first with bright blue tape, then stood with him, scanning the area, calling Hugh's name. Then closing her eyes to listen. All she heard was the soft sizzle of rain and the whisper of wind through the trees. When he nudged her, Fiona took the sock out of her pocket, opened the bag so Peck could refresh the scent. Find Hugh, she repeated. Let's find Hugh. He moved off again, and in her sturdy boots, Fiona stepped over the log and followed. When Peck angled south, she called her new position in to base, checked in with her team members. The kid had been out for a minimum of two hours, she thought. A lifetime for worried parents. But toddlers didn't have any real sense of time. Children of his age were very mobile, she mused, and didn't always understand the concept of being lost. They wandered, distracted by sights and sounds, and had considerable endurance, so it might be hours of that wandering before Hugh tired out and realized he wanted his mother. She watched a rabbit skitter away into the brush. Peck had too much dignity to do more than spare it a passing glance. But a little boy? Fiona thought. One who loved his Wubby, who enjoyed animals? One his mother said was fascinated by the forest? Wouldn't he want to try to catch it, probably hoping to play with it? He'd try, wouldn't he, to follow it? City boy, she thought, enchanted with the woods, the wildlife, the other of it all. How could he resist? She understood it, the magic of it. She'd been a city girl once herself, charmed and hypnotized by the green shadows, the dance of light, the sheer vastness of trees and hills and sea. A child could so easily lose himself in the acres and acres of parkland. He's cold, she thought. Hungry now and scared. He wants his mother. When the rain increased, they continued on, the tireless dog, the tall woman in rough pants and rougher boots. Her tail of pale red hair hung in a wet rope down her back, while lake-blue eyes searched the gloom. When Peck angled again, heading down a winding slope, she drew a picture in her mind. Less than a quarter of a mile farther, if they continued in this direction, they'd come to the creek that marked the southeast border of her sector. Chuck and his Quirk searched the other side. Fast water in the creek this time of year, she thought, cold and fast, the verges slippery with moss and rain. She hoped the little guy hadn't gone too close or, worse, tried to cross it. And the wind was changing, she realized. Goddamn it. They'd adjust. She'd refresh the scent again, give Peck a quick water break. They'd nearly clocked two hours in the field, and though Peck had alerted strongly three times, she'd yet to see a sign of the boy: a bit of cloth on a bramble, a print in the softened ground. She'd flagged the alerts in blue, used orange tape to mark their progress and knew they'd cross-tracked once or twice. Check in with Chuck, she decided. If Peck's on the scent and the kid crossed the creek . . . She didn't allow herself to think fell in. Not yet. Even as she reached for her radio, Peck alerted again. This time he broke into a run, shooting her the briefest of glances over his shoulder. And she saw the light in his eyes. Hugh! She lifted her voice over the now pounding rain and whistling wind. She didn't hear the boy, but she heard Peck's three quick barks. Like the dog, Fiona broke into a run. She skidded a little as she rounded the turn on the downward slope. And she saw near the banks of the busy creek a bit too near for her peace of mind a very wet little boy sprawled on the ground with his arms full of dog. Hey, Hugh, hi. She crossed the distance quickly, squatted down, pulling off her pack as she went. Im Fiona, and this is Peck. Doggie. He wept it into Peck's fur. Doggie. He's a good doggie. He's the best doggie ever. As Peck thumped his tail in agreement, Fiona pulled a space blanket out of her pack. Im going to wrap you up and Wubby, too. Is that Wubby? Wubby fell down. So I see. Its okay. Well get you both warm, okay? Did you hurt yourself? Uh-oh. She said it cheerfully as she draped the blanket over his shoulders and saw the mud and blood on his feet. Ouch, huh? Were going to fix you all up. His arms still around Peck, Hugh turned his cheek and sent Fiona a pitiful, bottom-lip-wobbling look. I want

Mommy. I bet you do. Were going to take you to Mommy, me and Peck. Here, look what Mommy sent you. She pulled out the little bag of gummy worms. Bad boy, Hugh said, but he eyed the candy with interest while he clung to Peck. Mommys not mad. Daddys not either. Here you go. She gave him the bag, pulled out her radio. When Hugh offered a worm to Peck, Peck gave Fiona a sidelong glance. Can I? Huh? Can I? Go ahead and say thank you. Peck took the candy delicately from the boy, gulped it down, then thanked him with a sloppy kiss that made Hugh giggle. With that sound warming her heart, Fiona contacted base. Weve got him. Safe and sound. Tell Mom hes eating his gummy worms and well be on our way home. She winked at Hugh, who fed the filthy and wet stuffed rabbit, then popped the same candy into his own mouth. Hes got some minor cuts and scrapes, hes wet, but hes alert. Over. Copy that. Good work, Fee. Do you need help? Over. Weve got it. Heading in. Ill keep you updated. Over and out. Better wash those down, she suggested, and offered Hugh her canteen. Whazit? Its just water. I like juice. Well make sure you get some when we get back. Drink a little, okay? He did what he was told, sniffing. I peed outside, like Daddy showed me. Not in my pants. She grinned at him and thought of Pecks strong alerts. You did good. How about a piggyback ride? As they had at the sight of the candy, his eyes brightened. Okay. She wrapped the blanket securely around him, then turned so he could climb onto her back. You call me Fee. If you need something, you just say, Fee, I need or I want. Doggie. Hes coming, too. Hell lead the way. From her crouch she rubbed Peck, hugged him hard. Good dog, Peck. Good dog. Return! With the pack slung over her shoulder and the boy on her back, the three of them began the hike out of the woods. Did you open the door by yourself, Hugh? Bad boy, he murmured. Well, yeah, she thought, but who wasnt bad now and then? What did you see out the window? Wubbies. Wubby said lets go see the wubbies. Uh-huh. Smart kid, she thought. Blame it on the rabbit. Hugh began to chatter then, so fast and in the toddlerese that defeated her on every third word. But she got the gist. Mommy and Daddy sleeping, bunnies out the window, what could you do? Then, if she interpreted correctly, the house disappeared and he couldnt find it. Mommy didnt come when he called, and he was going to get a time-out. He hated time-outs. She got the picture because even saying time-out made him cry with his face pressed against her back. Well, if you get one, I think Wubby needs one, too. Look, hey, Hugh, look. Its Bambi and his mom. He lifted his head, still sniffing. Then tears were forgotten as he squealed at the sight of the fawn and doe. Then he sighed, laid his head on her shoulder when she boosted him up a bit. I getting hungry. I guess you are. Youve had a really big adventure. She managed to dig a power bar out of her pack. It took less time to hike out than it had to search through, but by the time the trees began to thin the boy weighed like a stone on her back. Revived, rested, fascinated with everything, Hugh talked nonstop. Amused, Fiona let him ramble and dreamed of a vat of coffee, an enormous burger and a gallon bucket of fries. When she spotted the house through the trees, she dug out another gear and quickened her pace. Theyd barely cleared the line when Rosie and Devin ran out of the house. Fiona crouched. Off you go, Hugh. Run to Mommy. She stayed down, slung her arm around Peck, whose entire body wagged with joy. Yeah, she murmured to him as Devin beat his wife by a couple lopes and snatched Hugh up. Then the three of them were twined together in a tangle of limbs and tears. Yeah, its a good day. Youre the man, Peck. With her son safe in her arms, Rosie hurried toward the house. Devin broke away to walk unsteadily to Fiona. Thank you. I dont know how to . . . Youre welcome. Hes a great kid. Hes . . . everything. Thank you so much. As his eyes filled, Devin wrapped his arms around Fiona and, much as Hugh had, dropped his head on her shoulder. I cant tell you. You dont have to. Her own eyes stung as she patted his back. Peck found him. Hes the one. Hed be pleased if you shook his hand. Oh. Devin scrubbed at his face, drew in a couple steady breaths. Thank you, Peck. Thank you. He crouched, offered his hand. Peck smiled as dogs do and placed his paw in Devins hand. Can I . . . can I hug him? Hed love it. On a deep, shuddering sigh, Devin hugged Pecks neck, pressed his face to the fur. Over the mans shoulder, Peck sent Fiona a twinkling look. Wasnt that fun? he seemed to say. Can we do it again? TWO After debriefing, Fiona drove home while Peck sprawled in the back for a quick power nap. Hed earned it, she thought, just as shed earned the burger she was going to make herself and devour while she transcribed the log onto her computer. She needed to give Sylvia a call, tell her stepmother theyd found the kid and she wouldnt need her to fill in for the afternoon classes after all. Of course, now that the hard work was done, Fiona thought, the rain decided to back off. Already she could see a few breaks of blue in the gray. Hot coffee, she decided, hot shower, lunch and paperwork, and with some luck shed have dry weather for the afternoons schedule. As she drove out of the park, she caught the faint glimmer of a rainbow over the rain-churned sound. A good sign, she decided maybe even a portent of things to come. A few years before, her life had been like the rain dull and gray and dreary. The island had been her break in the clouds, and her decision to settle there her chance for

rainbows. Got what I need now, she murmured. And if theres more, well, well just see. She turned off the snaking road onto her bumpy drive. Recognizing the change in motion, Peck gave a snort and scrambled up to sit. His tail thumped the seat as they rattled over the narrow bridge spanning her skinny, bubbling stream.

When the house came into view, the tail picked up in rhythm and he gave a happy two-note bark. Her doll-sized cabin, shingled in cedar, generous with windows, grew out of her pretty chunk of forest and field. The yard sprawled and sloped, and held what she thought of as training zones. The sliding boards, teeter-totters, ladders and platforms, tunnels and pass-throughs ranged with benches, tire swings and ramps gave most the impression of a woodsy play area for kids. Not that far off, Fiona thought. The kids just had four legs. The other two of her three kids stood on the covered front porch, tails wagging, feet dancing. One of the best things about dogs, to Fionas mind, was their absolute joy in welcoming you home, whether youd been gone for five minutes or five days. There lay unconditional and boundless love. She parked, and her car was

immediately surrounded by canine delight while, inside, Peck wiggled in anticipation of reunion with his best pals. She stepped out to nuzzling snouts and wagging tails. Hi, boys. Ruffling fur, she angled to open the back door. Peck leaped out so the lovefest could begin. There was sniffing, happy grumbling, body bumping, then the race and chase. While she retrieved her pack, the three dogs charged away, zipping in circles and zigzags before charging back to her. Always ready to play, she mused as three pairs of eyes stared up at her with hopeful gleams. Soon, she promised. I need a shower, dry clothes, food. Lets go in. What do you say, wanna go in? In answer, all three bulleted for the door. Newman, a yellow Lab and the oldest, at six, and the most dignified, led the pack. But then Bogart, the black Lab and the baby, at three, had to stop long enough to grab up his rope. Surely someone wanted to play tug. They bounded in behind her, feet tapping on the wide-planked floor. Time, she thought with a glance at her watch. But not a lot of it. She left her pack out as she had to replace the space blanket before she tucked it away. While the dogs rolled on the floor, she stirred up the fire shed banked before leaving, added another log. She peeled off her wet jacket as she watched the flames catch. Dogs on the floor, a fire in the hearth, she thought, made the room cozy. It tempted her to just curl up on the love seat and catch her own power nap. No time, she reminded herself, and debated which she wanted more: dry clothes or food. After a struggle, she decided to be an adult and get dry first. Even as she turned for the stairs, all three dogs went on alert. Seconds later, she heard the rattle of her bridge. Who could that be? She walked to the window trailed by her pack. The blue truck wasnt familiar, and on an island the

size of Orcas there werent many strangers. Tourist was her first thought, a wrong turn, a need for directions. Resigned, she walked outside, gave her dogs the signal to hold on the porch. She watched the man get out. Tall, a lot of dark hair, scarred boots, worn jeans on long legs. Good face, she decided, sharp planes, sharp angles blurred by the shadow of stubble that said hed been too busy or too lazy to shave that morning.

The good face held an expression of frustration or annoyance maybe a combo of both as he shoved a hand through the mass of hair. Big hands, she noted, on the ends of long arms. Like the boots, the leather jacket he wore had some years on it. But the truck looked new. Need some help? she called out, and he stopped frowning at the training area to turn toward her. Fiona Bristow? His voice had an edge to it, not anger so much as that annoyance she read on his face. Behind her Bogart gave a little whine. Thats right. Dog trainer? I am. She stepped off the porch as he started toward her, watched his gaze skim over her three guardians. What can I do for you? Did you train those three? I did. His eyes, tawny, like warm, deeply steeped tea, shifted back to her. Then youre hired. Yay. For what? He pointed at her dogs. Dog trainer. Name your price. Okay.

Lets open the floor at a million dollars. Will you take it in installments? That made her smile. We can negotiate. Lets start this way. Fiona Bristow, she said, and offered her hand. Sorry. Simon Doyle. Working hands, she thought, as his hand, calloused took hers. Then the name clicked. Sure, wood artist. Mostly I build furniture. Great stuff. I bought one of your bowls a few weeks ago. I cant seem to resist a nice bowl. My stepmother carries your work in her shop. Island Arts. Sylvia, yeah. Shes great. He brushed off the compliment, the sale, the small talk. A man on a mission. Shes the one who told me to come talk to you. So how much of the million do you need up front? Wheres the dog? In the truck. She looked past him, cocked her head. She saw the pup through the window now. A Lab-retriever mix, she judged and currently very busy. Your dogs eating your truck. What? He spun around. Fuck! As he made the dash, Fiona signaled her newly alerted dogs to stay and sauntered after him. The best way to get a gauge on the man, the dog and their current dynamic was to watch how he handled the situation. For Gods sake. He wrenched open the door. Goddamn it, whats wrong with you? The puppy, obviously unafraid, unrepentant, leaped into the mans arms and slathered his face with eager kisses. Cut it out. Just stop! He held the puppy out at arms length, where it wagged and wriggled and yipped in delight. I just bought this truck. He ate the headrest. How could he eat

the headrest in under five minutes? It takes about ten seconds for a puppy to get bored. Bored puppies chew. Happy puppies chew. Sad puppies chew. Tell me about it, Simon said bitterly. I bought him a mountain of chew deals, but he goes for shoes, furniture, freaking rocks and everything else including my new truck. Here. He shoved the puppy at Fiona. Do something. She cradled the pup, who immediately bathed her face as if they were reunited lovers. She caught the faintest whiff of leather on his warm puppy breath. Arent you cute? Are you a pretty boy? Hes a monster. Simon snarled it. An escape artist who doesnt sleep. If I take my eye off him for two minutes, he eats something or breaks something or finds the most inappropriate place to relieve himself. I havent had a minutes peace in three weeks. Um-hmm. She snuggled the pup. Whats his name? Simon shot a look at the dog that didnt speak of returning sloppy kisses. Jaws. Very appropriate. Well, lets see what hes made of. She crouched down with him, then signaled her dogs to release. As they trotted over, she set the puppy on the ground. Some puppies would cower, some would hide or run away. But others, like Jaws, were made of sterner stuff. He leaped at the dogs, yipping and wagging. He sniffed as they sniffed, quivered with glee, nipped at legs and tails. Brave little soldier, Fiona murmured. He has no fear. Make him afraid. She sighed, shook her head. Why did you get a dog? Because my mother gave him to me. Now Im stuck with him. I like dogs, okay? Ill trade him for one of yours right now. You pick. She studied Simons sharp-boned, stubbled face. Not getting much sleep, are you? The only way I get so much as an hour at a time is if I put him in the bed. Hes already ripped every pillow I own to shreds. And hes started on the mattress. You should try crate-training him. I got a crate. He ate the crate. Or enough of it to get out. I think he must be able to flatten himself like a snake. I cant get any work done. I think maybe hes brain-damaged, or just psychotic. What he is, is a baby who needs a lot of playtime, love, patience and discipline, she corrected as Jaws merrily humped Newmans leg. Why does he do that? Hell hump anything. If hes a baby, why does he think about humping everything? Its instinct and an attempt to show dominance. He wants to be the big dog. Bogart! Get the rope! Jesus, I dont want to hang him. Exactly, Simon said, as the black Lab dashed for the porch and through the open door. The dog came out with the rope between his teeth, bounded to Fiona and dropped it at her feet. When she reached for it, he lowered on his front paws, shot his butt in the air and wagged. Fiona shook the rope. Bogart bounded up, chomped down and, snarling and pulling, engaged in a spirited tug-of-war. Jaws abandoned Newman, made a running leap for the rope, missed, fell on his back. He rolled, leaped again, little jaws snapping, tail a mad metronome. Want the rope, Jaws? Want the rope? Play! She lowered it so he could reach, and when his puppy teeth latched on, she released. Bogarts tug lifted the puppy off the ground and he wiggled and clung like a furry fish on the line. Determined, she mused, and was pleased when Bogart dipped down so the pup hit the ground, then adjusted his pull for the smaller dog. Peck, Newman, get the balls. Get the balls! Like their packmate, Peck and Newman dashed off. They came back with yellow tennis balls, spat them at Fionas feet. Newman, Peck! Race! She heaved the balls in quick succession so both dogs gave chase. Nice arm. Simon watched as the dogs retrieved, repeated the return. This time she made a kissing sound that had Jaws angling his head even while he pulled on the rope. She tossed the balls in the air a couple times, studying his eye line. Race! she repeated. As the big dogs sprinted off, the puppy scrambled after them. He has a strong play instinct and thats a good thing. You just need to channel it. Hes had his vet visits, his shots? Up-to-date. Tell me youll take him. Ill pay room and board. It doesnt work like that. As she spoke, she took the returned balls, threw them again. I take him, I take you. Youre a unit now. If youre not going to commit to the dog, to his training, his health and well-being, Ill help you find a home for him. Im not a quitter. Simon jammed his hands in his pockets as once again Fiona threw the balls. Besides, my mother would . . . I dont want to go there. Shes got this idea that since I moved out here, I need companionship. Its a wife or a dog. She cant give me a wife, so . . . He frowned as the big yellow Lab let the pup get the ball. Prancing triumphantly, Jaws brought it back. He fetched. Yes, he did. Ask him for it. What? Tell him to give you the ball. Crouch down, hold out your hand and tell him to give you the ball. Simon crouched, held out his hand. Give me Jaws leaped into his lap, nearly bowling Simon over, and rapped his ball-carrying mouth into his face. Tell him off, Fiona instructed, and had to bite the inside of her cheek as obviously, from his expression, Simon Doyle didnt see the humor. Set him down on his rump. Hold him down, gently, and take the ball away. When youve got the ball, say, Good dog, repeat it, be enthusiastic. Smile. Simon did as he was told, though it was easier said than done with a dog that could wiggle like a wet worm. There, hes successfully fetched and returned. Youll use small bits of food and lavish praise, the same commands, over and over again. Hell catch on. Tricks are great, but Im really more interested in teaching him not to destroy my house. He shot a bitter look at the mangled headrest. Or my truck. Following any command is a discipline. Hell learn to do what you ask, if you train him with play. He wants to play he wants to play

with you. Reward him, with play, and with food, with praise and affection, and hell learn to respect the rules of the house. He wants to please you, she added when the pup rolled over to expose his belly. He loves you. Then hes an easy target since weve had a rocky and short relationship. Whos your vet? Funaki. Mais the best. Ill want copies of his medical records for my files. Ill get them to you. Youll want to buy some small dog treats the sort he can just chomp down rather than the bigger ones hed need to stop and chew. Instant gratification. Youll want a head collar and a leash in addition to his regular collar. I had a leash. He Ate it, Fiona finished. Its common enough. Great. Head collar? Like a muzzle? She read Simons face clearly enough and was unsurprised when she saw him considering the idea of a muzzle. And was pleased when she noted his rejecting frown. No. Its like a halter, and its gentle and effective. Youll use it during training sessions here and at home. Instead of putting pressure on the throat, it puts pressure gentle pressure on calming points. It helps persuade a dog to walk rather than lunge and pull, to heel. And itll give him more control as well as put you more in tune with your pup. Fine. Whatever works. Id advise you to replace or repair the crate and lay in a very big supply of chew toys and rawhide. The ropes pretty much no-fail, but youll want tennis balls, rawhide bones, that sort of thing. Ill give you a basic list of recommendations and requirements for training. Ive got a class in . . . She checked her watch. Crap. Thirty minutes. And I didnt call Syl. As Jaws began to leap and try to climb up her leg, she simply bent over, pushed his rump to the ground. Sit. Because she didnt have a reward, she crouched, held him in place to pet and praise. You might as well stay if youve got the time. Ill sign you up. I dont have a million dollars on me. She released the pup, picked him up to cuddle. Got thirty? Probably. Thirty for a thirty-minute group session. Hes, what, about three months old? About. Well make it work. Its an eight-week course. Youre two behind. Ill juggle in two individual sessions to bring him up to speed. Does that work for you? Simon shrugged. Its cheaper than a new truck. Considerably. Ill lend you a leash and a head collar for now. Still carrying the puppy, she walked to the house. What if I paid you fifty, and you worked with him solo? She spared him a glance. Thats not what I do. Hes not the only one who needs training. She led him into the house before passing the puppy back to him. You can come on back. Ive got some extra leashes and collars, and you need some treats. I have to make a phone call. She veered off the kitchen to the utility room, where collars and leashes and brushes hung neatly according to type and size, and various toys and treats sat organized on shelves. It made him think of a small pet boutique. She gave Jaws another glance as he squirmed in Simons arms and tried to gnaw on his masters hand. Do this. She turned to the pup and, using her forefinger and thumb, gently closed his mouth. No. And keeping her eyes on the dogs, she reached behind her, took a rawhide chew toy shaped like a bone. This is yours. When he clamped it, she nodded. Good dog! Go ahead and set him down. When he chews on you, or something else he shouldnt, do what I did. Correct, give him a vocal command and replace with whats his. Give positive reinforcement. Consistently. Find a leash and a collar for him. She stepped out into the kitchen, grabbed the phone and hit her stepmothers number on speed dial. Crap, she muttered when it shifted to voice mail. Syl, I hope youre not already on your way. I got distracted and forgot to call. Im home. We found the little boy. Hes fine. Decided to chase a rabbit and got lost, but no worse for wear. Anyway, if youre on your way, Ill see you here. If not, thanks for the standby, and Ill call you later. Bye. She replaced the phone and turned to see Simon in the doorway, a leash in one hand and a small head collar in the other. These? Those should work. What little boy? Hmm. Oh, Hugh Cauldwell he and his parents are here for a few days vacation in the state park. He wandered out of the house and into the forest this morning while they were sleeping. You didnt hear? No. Why would I? Because its Orcas. Anyway, hes fine. Home safe. You work for the park? No. Im part of Canine Search and Rescue Association volunteers. Simon gestured toward the three dogs, currently sprawled on the kitchen floor like corpses. Those? Thats right. Trained and certified. You know, Jaws might be a good candidate for S-and-R training. He snorted out what mightve been a laugh. Right. Strong play drive, curious, courageous, friendly, physically sound. She lifted her eyebrows as the pup left his new toy to attack the laces on Simons boots. Energetic. Forget your training already, human? Huh? Correct and replace and praise. Oh. He crouched, repeated the series Fiona had demonstrated. Jaws clamped on the toy, then spat it out and went for the laces again. Just keep doing it. I need to put some things together. She started out, stopped. Can you work that coffeemaker? He glanced to the unit on the counter. I can figure it out. Do that, will you? Black, one sugar. Im running low. He frowned after her. While hed only been on the island a few months, he doubted hed ever get used to the casual, open-door policy. Just come on in, complete stranger, he thought, and while youre at it, make me some coffee while I leave you virtually alone. She only had his word on who he was, and besides that, nobody knew he was there. What if he was a psycho? A rapist? Okay, three dogs, he mused, eyeing them again. But so far theyd been friendly,

and about as casual as their mistress. And currently, they were snoring away. He wondered how she managed to live with three dogs when he could barely find a way to tolerate one. Looking down, he saw the pup had stopped chewing on his bootlaces because he'd fallen asleep sprawled over the boot, with the laces still caught in his teeth. With the same care and caution a man might use when easing away from a wild boar, Simon slowly slid his foot back, holding his breath until the pup oozed like furred water onto the kitchen floor. Passed out cold. One day, he thought as he crossed to the coffeemaker, he'd find a way to pay his mother back. One fine day. He studied the machine, checked the bean and water supply. When he switched it on the burr of the grinder had the pup waking with a barrage of ferocious barks. Across the room, the dogs cocked their ears. One of them yawned. The movement had Jaws leaping with joy, then charging the pack like a cannonball. While they rolled, batted and sniffed, Simon wondered if he could borrow one of them. Rent one, he considered. Like a babysitter. Since the cupboards had glass fronts, he didn't have any trouble finding a pair of bright cobalt blue mugs. He had to open a couple of drawers before he found the flatware, but that gave him the opportunity to marvel. Every drawer was tidy and organized. How did she do that? He'd been in his house for only a matter of months and his kitchen drawers looked like a flea market. Nobody should be that organized. It wasn't natural. Interesting-looking woman, though, he decided as he poked around a little. The hair that wasn't really red, wasn't really blond, the eyes of absolutely clear and perfect blue. Her nose tilted up a little on the end and sported a dusting of freckles, and a slight overbite made her bottom lip seem particularly full. Long neck, he thought as he poured the coffee, lanky build with no rack to speak of. Not beautiful. Not pretty or cute. But . . . interesting, and the few times she'd smiled? Almost arresting.

Almost. He dumped a spoon of sugar from a squat white bowl in one mug, picked up the other. He took his first sip looking out her over-the-sink window, then turned when he heard her boot steps. She moved briskly, with an efficiency that hinted at athleticism. Wiry, he thought, as much as lanky. He saw her shift her gaze down, followed it and saw Jaws circle and squat. Simon opened his mouth, but before he could yell Hey!, his usual response, Fiona tossed the folder she carried on the counter and clapped her hands twice, sharply. The sound startled Jaws out of his squat. She moved fast, scooping up the pup with one hand, grabbing the leash with the other. Good dog, Jaws, good dog. Lets go out. Time to go out. Pantry, second shelf, canister with mini-treats, grab a handful, she ordered Simon, and clipped the leash on the collar as she headed out the back door. The three dogs whooshed after her in a flurry of fur and paws. He found her gnome-sized pantry as sparsely organized as the drawers, dug out a handful of little dog cookies the size of his knuckle from a big glass jar. Hooking the mug handles in one hand, he walked outside. She still carried the dog, with her long legs eating up the short distance to the edge of trees that guarded the back of her property. By the time she put Jaws down Simon caught up. Stop. She stopped the pup from attacking the leash, rubbed his head. Look at the big guys, Jaws! What are the big guys doing? She turned him, walked a few steps. Obviously, the pup was more interested in the dogs, currently sniffing, lifting legs, sniffing, than the leash. He bounded after them. I'm giving him some slack. Thanks. Fiona took the coffee, drank deep, sighed. Praise Jesus. Okay, you're going to want to pick a regular spot for your Poop-town. You don't want land mines all over your property. So you consistently take him where you want him to go. Then hell just start going there. You're the one who has to be vigilant and consistent. Hes just a baby, so that means you're going to have to take him out several times a day. As soon as he wakes up in the morning and before you go to bed at night, every time he eats. In his mind's eye, Simon saw his life becoming a revolving door swinging at the whims of the dogs elimination needs. And when he does what he's supposed to do, Fiona continued, be thrilled. Positive reinforcement. Lavish. He wants to please you. Wants to be praised and rewarded. See there, the big guys are going, so he's not going to be outdone. Simon shook his head. When I take him out, he spends an hour sniffing, rolling and screwing around, then cuts loose five seconds after I take him back in. Show him. You're a guy. Whip it out and pee. Now? She laughed and yeah, he thought, almost arresting. No, but in the privacy of your own. Here. She handed him the leash. Get down to his level, call him. Happy, happy! Use his name, then when he comes, make over him, give him one of the treats. He felt stupid, making happy noises because his dog shit in the woods, but thinking of the countless piles he'd cleaned off his floors, he followed instructions. Well done. Lets try a basic command before the others get here. Jaws. She took hold of him to turn his attention, stroked him until he'd calmed down. She took one of the treats Simon held, palmed it in her left hand, then lifted her right over the pup's head, extended her index finger. Jaws, sit. Sit! As she spoke, she moved her finger over his head so he looked up, trying to follow it. And his butt hit the ground. Good dog! Good! She fed him, petted him, praised him. Repeat, repeat. Hell automatically look up, and when he does the back of him goes down. As soon as he sits, praise, reward. Once he gets that, you try it with just the

voice command. If he doesn't get it, go back and repeat. When he does, praise, reward. She stepped back. Since the pup wanted to follow her, Simon had a little struggle. Make him focus on you. You're the boss. He thinks you're a patsy. Annoyed, Simon shot her one cold stare. But he had to admit, when the pup's rump hit the ground, he felt a little spurt of pride and pleasure. *Revue de presse* Search-and-rescue dogs are a focal point of this wonderful tale of love and adventure. Roberts has a marvelous ability to blend in the perfect amounts of character drama, realistic romance and chilling suspense. The result is an unputdownable read! Roberts again proves why her name is synonymous with excellence. *RT Book s* Strong romantic suspense... The serial killer subplot is not new, as the copycat has been done before, but Nora Roberts makes it seem fresh with her incredible writing skill as she uses the Search and Rescue canines as key elements in the exciting story line. Readers will enjoy Ms. Roberts' entertaining Puget Sound thriller. *Midwest Book* Roberts deftly packs the plot of her latest supremely satisfying novel with plenty of sexy romance, high-stakes suspense, clever dialogue and fascinating details about Search and Rescue dogs. *Booklist* A breezy summer read... entertaining. *Associated Press [A]* gripping page-turner from one of the genre's best. *Library Journal*