

AGILE MOVES



JC Shelby



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

AGILE MOVES

By JC Shelby

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

A man naps on his back on a daybed, a floral sheet pulled up to mid-chest. His right arm is curled around a white bull terrier, whose head and paw rest over the large winged tattoo on the man's chest. A smartphone is clutched in the man's right hand. His ears, nipples and right nostril are pierced. Tattoos can be seen on his upper chest, shoulder, and all down his left arm.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I've always been the good kid, did everything I was supposed to. I never partied and I always earned perfect grades. Then I went to college straight out of high school and earned my degree. I always do whatever is asked of me, I take care of everyone now, including my parents. I'm twenty-five and I'm so busy taking care of everybody else's lives I have no time for one of my own. My social life consists of my rescue beagle and two cats, but one night a friend from work made me go with him to a party where I meet Kyle. He's covered in tattoos and piercings, and he's the bad boy of my every fantasy, the type of guy I'm absolutely not supposed to want. Or at least that's the way he appears. And he seems to be looking at me just as much too. Please tell me how we got to this point, how I was able to see this sight in front of me, and how he made me fall in love with him.

Please give these two a HEA, or at the very least a HFN, the rest is up to you.

Sincerely,

Raylynn

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: men with pets, men who cook, accountant, agility dogs, tattoos, coming out, hurt/comfort, sweet/no sex

Word Count: 45,351

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Chapter One

Starting Position

Pets have no respect for alarm clocks or their human's need to sleep. But, when one had an energetic, young beagle and two hungry cats, did one truly need an alarm clock? Long before Dan wanted to even think about getting up, Rebel placed his paws on the mattress and tugged at the blankets, followed by an I-want-out-soon whine. Nisaba and Maat took this as an invitation to scamper noisily in from their favorite nighttime spots and pounce on the bed. Nisaba used Dan's back as a springboard to the other side, before she curled up near his head and began purring, while Maat sat near his feet, trilling and talking to herself. Or maybe to him. Who knew? At this hour, who cared?

Despite his best efforts to fall back to sleep, when Rebel's whines grew less polite, as they increased in volume and threatened to morph into barks or perhaps an all-out howl, Dan caved. He opened his eyes and blinked at the clock. Only five thirty. Fifteen minutes of prime sleeping time lost.

Someday, if he ever got his own house and not this little rental, he might install one of those smart pet doors that would let Rebel in and out with a radio key on his collar. Although he would need to research them carefully. He was not convinced the cats wouldn't figure out how to dash outside with the dog. Both could be very sneaky about doors. And he did not want the cats outside, especially at night when coyotes and an occasional bobcat hunted up and down the washes and utility roads. Outdoor cats often vanished without a trace, and even small dogs were at risk. Just last month, the cute little Chihuahua mix that lived three blocks over had been killed by a bobcat.

Stumbling out of bed, he made his way to the kitchen and opened the back door to let Rebel out. The automatic coffeemaker turned itself on as he closed the door. Was he even supposed to be awake before the coffee had finished brewing? Maat brushed up against his ankles, as Nisaba jumped on the shelf near the wet-food bowls, giving a long plaintive meow, pretending she hadn't been fed in a week.

"You still have dry food, silly cat. And I am not feeding you until six thirty, no matter how much you yowl. That's the rule." Dan kicked a little plastic ball and sent it across the floor, bell jingling. The tortoiseshell cat gave chase, batting it, as he picked up Maat, stroking her soft gray fur, tapping her white paws, scratching behind her ears.

Still cradling Maat, Dan opened his Kindle Fire—his one extravagant Christmas present to himself—and brought up his favorite online news app. He was listening to the stories as he played with the cats, occasionally glancing at the screen, when his alarm clock radio started playing in the bedroom. Sighing, he went to swat it off before he pulled on sweats and sneakers.

He sipped some coffee, feeling his brain engage a little more. He and Rebel left for their usual half-hour morning walk. By the time he'd fed the animals, eaten his own breakfast, showered and dressed for work, he felt almost ready to face the day. Almost.

For a moment, after he finished fiddling with his tie, he looked in the mirror. Some days he woke up wondering if he would still recognize himself. Even with his trio of pets, he often just felt lonely. And lost. As if he had misplaced some essential part of Danilo Zanetti long ago, and couldn't remember where. Every day, he half-expected to see some sign of change, something to mark the discontent and restlessness.

But he still looked the same: dark brown almost black hair, courtesy of either his Italian-American father or Mexican-American mother; brown eyes, probably from both, although perhaps more consistently from the maternal side; light olive skin, probably his mother, but maybe both; and completely average height of five-ten. Fortunately, he tended towards slim rather than muscular or stocky. Seeing nothing in his reflection that showed any visible sign of his inner turmoil, Dan turned away.

Grabbing his gym bag from its designated chair and his lunch from the refrigerator, he left the house precisely at seven to drop Rebel off with his parents for the day.

Just before eight, Dan parked his car in the far reaches of the parking lot of Goldheim, Emrich, and Mendoza, as far from the covered parking spaces belonging to the senior partners and upper administrators as it was possible to get. His ten-year-old Corolla—with its sun-damaged, flaking, silver paint job, duct-taped side mirror, and assorted nicks and dents acquired from time spent in the close confines of the university garages and lots—likely brought down the average value of the vehicles driven by the employees of the prestigious midsize law firm. Or perhaps their combined worth was so great that the mediocrity of his car scarcely made a dent. *Get a grip, Danilo. What is with you today? Snap out of it.*

Inside the building, he waved at Heather, sitting behind the reception desk as she talked on her headset and took notes on her computer. She gave him a distracted smile. He made his way through the public area, past the lounge and client meeting rooms, to the maze of rooms housing the support staff. He shoved his lunch in the break room fridge before he slipped into the tiny suite shared by the three members of the Finance and Accounting Department.

He sat down at his workstation and put down his travel mug of coffee. As his computer booted up, he took a moment to admire the backdrop of photos and magazine clippings of some of the monuments and landmarks and creatures he hoped to one day see: the Giza pyramids in Egypt—although maybe not with the current political unrest; vibrantly-hued birds in tropical rainforests; hard-to-reach places such as Machu Picchu or faraway mountaintop monasteries; the sand dunes in Namibia; medieval castles and towns in Europe; wondrous fish along the Great Barrier Reef; and—closer to home—spectacular photos from national parks and wildlife preserves within the United States and Canada. So much of the world to see, and he had never been outside of Arizona and California. Not even to Mexico, despite living for twenty-five years only an hour north of the Mexican border. How abysmally pathetic was that?

He then looked at the photo of his family, taken the last time Sergio was in town, and finally acknowledged the source of his discontent. In the photo, the four siblings—Sergio, himself, Rafael, and Tara—stood in the back, while Dad, Mom, Adrianna and the babies sat in the front on a couch. Rafael rested a hand on Adrianna's shoulder as she held their two children on her lap. Mom had pleaded for a family portrait—who knew when Sergio would be in town again, after all—so everyone else had acquiesced. Dad had refused to be photographed in his wheelchair. And everyone smiled, as if each person was part of one big, happy, functional family. And just maybe, for a brief moment suspended in time, they had been. But too often it seemed to Dan as if that moment was a lie.

Dan placed the photo facedown and tried to focus on his work. Numbers were safe, predictable. Numbers didn't fight. Numbers wouldn't hurt. But today numbers could not distract him enough to escape the memories.

Dan dragged Rafi away from the yelling. His younger brother was only six. Dan wondered what was going on between Sergio and Dad, even as he wanted to protect his sibling from the fight. He just hoped the shouting didn't wake Tara. Dan made Rafi stay outside with him, despite the heat and Rafi's whining, until Mom came for them and called them inside.

After dinner, when Mom came to his bedroom, he asked her, "Why did Sergio say Dad wasn't real?"

Mom touched his forehead, "Sergio didn't say your dad wasn't real, mijo. He just found out your dad isn't his biological father."

"What's that?"

"I'll explain when you're older."

"Mom, I'm nine! You can tell me."

And Mom had explained that before she married Dad, back when she lived in Los Angeles, she had been married to Jorge Santiago, Sergio's blood father. Jorge had died when Sergio had been only a few months old. "But your father adopted Sergio, Dan. Sergio is as much your father's child as you or Rafi or Tara, do you understand?"

"Then why is Sergio so mad?" he asked, but Mom didn't answer that question.

Understanding did not come for years.

"Dan, do you wanna know how my real dad, 'scuse me, my bio-dad, died?" Sergio asked, in a tone that dared him to wimp out.

Eleven-year-old Dan shrugged. He didn't like this new sarcastic attitude of Sergio's. His response didn't matter, because even if he said no, Sergio would probably tell him anyway.

"He was killed in a bar fight. With a knife." And Sergio spun out a long and gory tale of his biological father heroically and singlehandedly taking on a whole gang. Dan was impressed but dubious, not sure whether to believe it or not. Probably not. Sergio had been making up a lot of wild stories recently.

A week later, Sergio was suspended for several days for fighting in school. A month after that, he got locked up in the juvenile detention center for a weekend for having drugs in his backpack. Mom spent the whole time crying.

He asked Dad if there was anything he could do to help her, to make her feel better. "Just help keep Rafael and Tara entertained. You're a good boy, Dan. I know I can count on you to help out."

Dan recalled having to "help out" more and more over the next few years. As Sergio continued to fight with Dad, Mom pleaded with Dad about Sergio, and Mom pleaded with Sergio to listen to Dad. And throughout it all, his

parents absently counted on him to be the good kid, to not cause them any trouble.

Dan did not cry the day Sergio left for basic training. Tara, picking up on Mom's emotions, had started to cry and given Sergio a watery hug. Sergio had patted the seven year old awkwardly on the head and then given eleven year old Rafael a friendly punch on the shoulder.

To Dan's surprise, Sergio gave him a rough hug and whispered, "Take care of Mom, brat, and please try to get into trouble once in a while. Being perfect isn't good for you."

And now, almost eleven years later, Dan wished he had listened. Maybe he should have tried to rebel in high school. But no, he had become obsessed with always doing his best, to make up for Sergio being such a hotheaded screw-up. At least *he* could make his parents proud. As long as they never learned his secret. Never learned that he was gay.

When Dan had started feeling an interest in his male, rather than his female, classmates during his freshmen year of high school, he suppressed his urges as much as he could. His parents did not need grief and drama from him. Dr. Emilio Zanetti was a conservative Catholic, and Dan knew he wouldn't approve of his firstborn being gay. So he kept his mouth closed and his pants zipped.

Unfortunately, the habit of obedience to his family had become so ingrained and second nature that he did not argue enough when he should have.

"But, Dad! It's only two hundred a month. And the other guys aren't party animals or anything. Jeff and Aiden are both in business school with me and Jaime is a sophomore getting straight A's in chemistry. And the house is only ten minutes by bike from campus."

Dan felt desperate. After four years of hard work and little social life in high school, he had graduated with the honors his father had expected. He had counted on college being a time of escape and travel and, he hoped, finally getting to explore and act on his attraction to other boys. And he had been excited when he was accepted at a number of prestigious out-of-state colleges. But his parents looked at the cost and the lack of available financial aid for a middle-class family, and said no. Secretly, Dan thought his mom just didn't want another son to move away. When he reluctantly agreed to stay in Tucson and attend the business college at the University of Arizona, he had thought he would at least be allowed to leave the house. Apparently not.

“Dan, we also have Rafael and Tara to put through college. And don’t try to tell me no other college freshmen are living at home with their parents.”

Since Dan couldn’t honestly tell him that, he said nothing.

“And you won’t have to worry about shopping or cooking. Your mother can still do that for you.”

Dan didn’t bother to point out that he liked cooking and usually took over in the kitchen at least twice a week. He already sensed he was not going to win this argument, at least not today.

“Fine.” He stalked away, dismayed. How was he going to get a boyfriend when he lived with his parents and didn’t dare bring one home? He had already cited classwork as an excuse to stop going to church services—he was tired of hearing that he was a sinner—but tomorrow he was going to go out and get a job. If his parents didn’t want to pay for him to live elsewhere, he would pay his own way.

Dan had considered himself lucky to get a job at Costco. He saved almost every penny he earned. He loved his parents, but he had wanted out from under their roof and watchful eyes. And he also wanted to travel—the world was so diverse and there were so many places to see. So he had started a secret money market account for his future travel and rent, and put as much money into it as he could. And dreamed. And schemed.

He made plenty of friends among his classmates, but had looked outside the business school for his first tentative relationships. At least one of the department’s professors golfed with his father, and Dan had been determined to keep from outing himself to his family. As a result, his attempts to date had been furtive, unsatisfactory, and not fair to the other guys involved. He’d kept sane by telling himself that maybe once he graduated he would have the guts to tell his parents the truth.

“Where are you going again?” Tara asked, as she watched Dan packing clothes into a large duffel bag.

“We’re driving through Vegas, then over to California, up the coastal highway all the way to Seattle, then east through Idaho and down through Colorado and New Mexico. Aiden, Stu, Paulo and me. Although we are leaving Paulo in Seattle.”

“Where will you be staying? Won’t it cost a lot?”

“Sometimes with friends. Usually we are going to be in youth hostels or camping, but we’ll stay at cheap hotels if we need to. With four of us, they

shouldn't be too much per person. And Aiden has an annual pass for the National Parks."

Excitement hummed through Dan. He was twenty-one. Only one year left in college. And finally, he was getting his chance on this three-week road trip to go places, see new things and experience life. Just two more days until they left. And then when he got back next month, he could finally move out of this house. He had enough money saved to cover most of a year's rent, even after paying his share of trip expenses.

And how could his parents possibly object to him leaving when Rafael had already left, within two weeks of his high-school graduation, to move in with his pregnant girlfriend? No matter what obstacles or arguments his parents tried to raise, nothing could stop him from finally making his belated escape.

His cell phone rang. He looked at the caller ID. Why would the hospital be calling him? Unless they were trying to reach Dad? Dan didn't think Dad was on call tonight, but Dad would have turned off his cell when he and Mom were at their show. Which had ended an hour ago. Actually, he was surprised his parents weren't home yet, unless they stopped for dessert somewhere.

"Hello?"

Two minutes later, the cell phone slipped from his hand to thud on the carpet, and Dan sank down on his bed next to Tara.

"What's wrong? Dan? Dan?" Fear laced Tara's voice.

"We need to go to the hospital. Now. Mom and Dad were in a car accident. Dad's in the ER. Maybe Mom, too."

In an instant, everything changed. A drunken idiot had run a red light and precipitated a multi-car accident. For the past four years, Dan had assumed much of the responsibility of taking care of his family. Duty kept him chained to Tucson. He had put the needs of his family above his own desires, giving up his dreams of travel, of a boyfriend.

And in all those years, he still hadn't worked up the courage to tell them he was gay.

Dan turned the photo back over, staring at his family. He drank his coffee. And shoving the memories into the past where they belonged, tried to convince himself he was content. And knew he lied.

“Hey, Z! Got a minute?”

“Just a sec.” Dan didn’t bother to look up. Even if he hadn’t recognized Jacob’s voice, no one else used his last initial as a friendly nickname. He double-checked the information on the new client’s credit card receipt and retainer contract with the data he had entered into the worksheet and saved his work before he turned to his friend. “What’s up?”

As one of the two IT men, Jacob could get away with wearing dark polo shirts and khakis, much to Dan’s envy. Although he sometimes had to crawl around on the floor playing with cords and cables, or do battle with toner cartridges and photocopiers. Maybe it all evened out. Jacob hovered in the door, blond hair backlit, a deviant angel always ready to divert his friends with an amusing anecdote. Dan had not seen him much this week, because software upgrades for the lawyers and their assistants had kept Jacob busy on the upper floor.

“Leo and I are having a party tonight at our place. We’ve both had crazy weeks and want to unwind. We’ve invited a bunch of friends. You should come.”

Dan was about to offer an automatic refusal, when Jacob continued, “Before you say something about your parents, your sister, or your pets, tell me this. When was the last time you did something fun, just for you? And going to the gym, the dog park, or a company picnic doesn’t count. When did you last have a night out with friends?”

Dan thought back, the weeks and months blurring together in an almost unbroken pattern. Tara’s seventeenth birthday dinner and Rafael’s twenty-first birthday barhop still both counted as family events. His few “evenings out” had been more about a basic need for adult interaction, not necessarily about fun. Hell, was going to the gym across the street from work actually the most social thing he did?

“If you can’t remember, it’s been too long.” Jacob gestured at the pictures of exotic places tacked to the wall behind Dan’s monitor. “You might not be able to go to those places tonight, or even next week, but you can certainly drive twenty minutes to our house, eat some food, have a beer, hang out with friends, relax, and enjoy yourself. You can even bring your dog.”

“Who else is going to be there? From here, I mean.”

“Heather and Joe, for sure. Maybe Natasha. Maybe Chris. Don’t worry, no one will be there who might slip and say something if they even guess your secret.”

Unlike Dan, Jacob Riley was out and proud. He didn't flaunt being gay, but he didn't hide it either, talking freely about his partner Leo Gresham, inviting the man to company events. But Jacob also understood the reasons for Dan's silence and didn't criticize him for it. Jacob was a better friend than Dan deserved, his best friend here at the firm. Hell, with the dispersal of Dan's former classmates across the country, he was probably Dan's best friend in Pima County. *I haven't been keeping track of my friends or treating them very well recently.*

"What time and what can I bring? I still need to pick up Rebel and feed the cats first." Dan squelched the feeling of guilt that surfaced as he planned to skip out on dinner with his family. *I have no reason to feel guilty. Just an evening with friends.*

Jacob grinned and scrawled a phone number across a piece of paper with a map on it. "Ask Leo. He's in charge of food."

Chapter Two

Double Jump

After Dan parked at his parents' house, he went directly into the backyard. Rebel, having heard his car, scabbled impatiently at the patio screen, baying his welcome. Dan laughed as he opened the door and Rebel bolted out, jumping up against him. "Did you have a good day chasing squirrels? Did you scare away all the doves?" He rubbed and scratched Rebel, as the beagle moaned his approval and bragged about his exploits. Grabbing a plastic newspaper bag from the box in the enclosed patio, Dan cleaned up after Rebel's daily activity and tossed the waste in the trash barrel.

For a minute, he considered just bolting with Rebel and not going inside the house, but years of good manners and filial obedience prevailed. As always. He entered through the back door, leaving Rebel outside.

His dad sat at his desk in his office, reading papers. "That damn dog was barking at squirrels all day." He didn't even look up. "Had to bring him inside to keep him quiet."

"He likes being with you. And being inside with people. Rebel's a dog. They chase squirrels." *And you thought it was funny yesterday.*

"Well, you need to train him up better. He leaves his toys everywhere. I almost ran over one this morning. You spoil him."

Not as much as you do. "I'll try." The online dog training videos he'd watched hadn't covered how to keep a dog from acting like a dog, just basic commands. Maybe he needed a copy of 'Dog Training for Dummies.' *Is there even a command for Don't Leave Dog Toys in the Path of the Wheelchair?*

"Weeds are popping up in the front yard. Take care of them before Monday."

Dan didn't argue. "I'll come by on Sunday."

His father's attention returned to the article he was reading. While Dad hadn't been able to resume employment as a surgeon, following the accident, or find a wheelchair-accessible golf course, his current job as an editor for a medical journal seemed to satisfy his need to be doing something useful with his mind and his training. *If only he would apply the same effort to his physical therapy, he could get out and about more. Regain some of the mobility in those*

legs. Maybe even play some golf. He needs to focus on what he has now, not what he lost.

Dan went to the kitchen and kissed his mother on the cheek. As she cooked, she watched TV, enrapt by whatever story-of-the-week had the blonde Headline News anchor in histrionics. Dan winced as the TV host's voice grew more strident. "Dinner won't be until six thirty. Rafi and Adrianna are coming with the babies. Tara is spending the weekend with Eden. They're working on a class project."

"Well, since Rafael and Adrianna are coming, I know I can leave you in good company. I am meeting up with some colleagues from work for dinner. So I need to get home and feed Maat and Nisaba." *Colleagues. Yes, that sounds professional. As long as I don't add something about networking. That might be stretching it. Although, Jacob. IT. Computer networks.* Dan decided to leave before he started babbling, and his mom thought of a reason to detain him or asked questions he didn't want to answer. "See you Sunday."

He dashed out without looking behind him and grabbed Rebel's travel harness from its spot near the back door as he left.

Jacob gave Dan a rough hug, held out a hand for Rebel to sniff, then gave the dog a quick head rub. "Hi, Z. Come in! The other dogs are out back, go introduce yours. And yourself."

"To the dogs or the people?"

Jacob laughed. Dan passed over a bag containing fresh local tortillas and a brick of extra-sharp cheddar.

"Great! We don't want to run out. If Leo and the others get too carried away, we are going to be having an impromptu salsa contest to go with the quesadillas. Never ask 'can someone please make more salsa?' when three cooks or wannabe cooks are in the kitchen at the same time. Maybe I can get one of them outside to man the grill before blood is spilled."

"Want me to do it?"

Jacob looked skeptical. "I'd trust you with a lot of things, Z. My taxes, my secrets, my bail, if I ever need it, maybe even my investments. But not my protein. Not until I have proof you actually know how to grill."

"How hard can it be?" he teased.

“There are people in this house who would tell you grilling is an art. An art! And others who would say it is a science. Or both. But all would agree it requires skill gleaned only by many hours slaving over the heat.”

Dan choked down a laugh at the pretend dramatics. “Real poetic. I will let a true master burn your meat to a crisp, then.”

Jacob dragged him through the house and into the back yard, performing quick introductions to some of the people Dan didn't know. Although law firm staff and Leo's physical therapy coworkers made up about a third of the group, once their significant others and children were included, along with Leo's cop brother and Jacob's vet tech sister, and other friends whose connection he didn't know, Dan soon felt overwhelmed. The problem with not having a social life was being unable to meet people in small batches over time, like wading into the shallows. Getting tossed in the deep end could drown a person.

Dan took refuge with the dogs wandering around the spacious walled yard. As he let Rebel off the leash, he spotted a plastic crate of dog toys at the edge of the patio. He searched through an assortment of balls and chew toys until he found a worn but serviceable tennis ball. He started by tossing the ball just for Rebel, but soon other dogs wanted in on the action. In addition to his beagle, a black lab mix, a boxer, a corgi, and some sort of spaniel also got into the action as he tossed toys to the far end of the garden. Only an aging greyhound curled near a heat lamp ignored the ruckus. He occasionally lifted his head from his paws to watch the younger dogs, before resting it back down again. The furry scramble soon drew attention and laughter. Other dog owners came to join him, and some of the older children helped throw the toys.

Once the little pack was petted and panting, Dan snagged a bottle of a local microbrew from the cooler and took a seat at one of the metal tables on the patio. Rebel wandered around the yard, sniffing, trying to divine the stories of each new scent, occasionally glancing at Dan.

“Is that your beagle?”

Dan turned in his chair to look at the man standing next to him. And froze. Tattoos. Everywhere. The man wore a black muscle tee, and his sleeveless arms were covered with tattoos. Even the back of one hand. Dan's gaze traced the tattoos up the man's body, not even noticing individual designs, just an impression of colors and patterns. He had never seen so many tattoos before in his life, total, let alone on one person. Or if he had, he couldn't remember it now. Sure, he knew people who had one or two. And he had seen a few on guys at the gym. And girls. But never this many.

Who was this guy? A biker? A thug? Surely he wasn't part of a gang or something. Weren't their tattoos more subtle? Maybe a bartender or a rock musician or something? An undercover cop? Not with that tattoo job. An artist who created twisted things out of sharp objects? An ex-con who had acquired all his tats in prison? Dan was so busy staring in fascination at the tattoos that it took him a moment to raise his eyes higher. Golden-brown hair cropped close to his head. Silver earrings. Was that a piercing in his nose? Ouch!

Dan blinked, finally looking into amused blue eyes. Could the man tell what he was thinking? Part of his brain knew the man had asked him a question, although Dan had forgotten what it was, and the other part wondered how much the tattoos had hurt. And why he suddenly couldn't seem to breathe.

Rebel ran up to Dan, yipping once, breaking the spell. Dan looked down into the soulful brown eyes of his dog, trying to shake off the images of blue eyes and tattoos.

He swallowed, as the question belatedly registered in his brain. "Yes, this is Rebel."

Tattoo God knelt down to greet Rebel and praise his beautiful tricolor patterns. Dan had an excellent opportunity to observe the man's tight blue jeans and scuffed leather boots. Rebel closed his eyes, the epitome of canine contentment. Dan swallowed. He wanted to say something else, but the ability to speak eluded him.

Leo came outside, carrying a tray of meat and a bundle of fabric. He placed the tray down by the grill, then came over to them, nodding a greeting. "Hey, Dan, great to see you. Glad you could finally make it. Kyle, here's an extra sweatshirt."

Tattoo God—Kyle—stood, and Dan almost moaned in disappointment when the tattoos disappeared from sight beneath the gray material. But as the spring night was rapidly cooling, Dan couldn't blame him for wanting a warmer layer. Kyle smiled at Dan, leaned over to rub Rebel once more, and followed Leo over to the grill. Dan watched as the two men chatted quietly.

He took a couple gulps of his beer before setting the bottle down. No more alcohol on an empty stomach. He was never going to run the risk of driving under the influence. And he kind of felt impaired right now. Flushed. Maybe aroused. Hell, who would have thought all those tattoos would be so hot? He had never thought he harbored any bad-boy fantasies, but now... oh God, maybe he should take Rebel and leave.

Before Dan had a chance to panic, Heather dropped down beside him, blocking his view of the men at the grill. *Probably better that way.* She started chatting about work, and Dan hoped he was making appropriate responses. Joe soon joined them, carrying plates of chopped veggies, tortilla chips, pita bread wedges, fresh guacamole, and hummus for the three of them to share.

Soon more people flooded the backyard, unfolding tables and chairs. Plates, utensils, and cold food started piling up on an improvised buffet table made of an artistically painted old door resting on white sawhorses. Latin-American jazz began playing softly in the background. Jacob circulated around the yard, chatting, charming, at ease with everyone, as Leo presided over the grill and occasionally shouted back and forth through the open window with people in the kitchen.

When Jacob's sister, Louise, came outside, Rebel recognized a purveyor of canine treats and abandoned Dan to cast an imploring look up at Louise. After a quick glance at Dan for permission, she made a show out of searching for a treat, before producing one from the pocket of her jeans.

"Traitor. Fickle dog. You leave me for another, and all for a tiny snack."

"What do you expect when you are obviously so mean to him?" Louise winked. "Anytime you want me to take this handsome fellow off your hands..."

"You had your chance."

"That's not the way I remember events."

Jacob came up behind her and tugged her blond ponytail. "No harassing Z. You already have enough dogs."

Louise laughed and wandered off to pay her respects to the elderly greyhound.

People mingled, talking and laughing. The inescapable topic of college basketball and the Wildcats' chances in the NCAA tournament arose, followed by discussion of the university baseball and softball teams. In some miracle of timing, containers of steamed tortillas and a platter of hot cheddar-filled quesadillas appeared at about the same time as plates of grilled marinated beef and chicken, now roughly diced. The spread also included bowls of shredded pork, seasoned rice, lettuce, chopped tomatoes, sautéed onions and peppers, sour cream, black beans, and the promised selection of homemade salsas.

As Dan piled food on his sturdy picnic plate, he wondered if this party had really all been planned in just one afternoon, or if Jacob had waited to invite

him at the last minute to give him less time to back out or second guess his acceptance. A mound of coordinated food, borrowed or rented tables and chairs, close to thirty guests. Thinking back on the other invitations of Jacob's he had declined, or accepted then backed out of, he began to think that a legitimate possibility. Despite the temptation, he refrained from asking Heather and Joe when they had been invited. He didn't want to put them in an awkward position.

Two physical therapists and an Air Force sergeant, either the husband or boyfriend of one of the therapists, joined their table, and the six of them traded amusing anecdotes about their work, their pasts, their pets, or their jobs. Dan may have snuck two or three glances at Kyle. Okay, so maybe more like a dozen. And occasionally, he could have sworn Kyle looked at him, too, even though he didn't think he had been caught staring. Dan tried to be subtle, pretending to just be looking around the yard.

Kyle sat engaged in a serious discussion with Vince Gresham, Leo's big brother, a burly Tucson Police Department detective. For a few seconds, Dan wondered if Vince would arrest Kyle at the party, but then shook off the fanciful idea. Kyle was obviously a friend of Leo's, and therefore extremely unlikely to be a hardened criminal. Besides, at some point Vince began cradling his young daughter in his lap, and even passed her over to Kyle to hold when he went to refill his plate. Dan crossed ex-con and gang member off his mental list of potential jobs for Kyle.

After consolidation of the depleted food on the buffet table, an eclectic assortment of donated desserts appeared: cookies, assorted ice creams and sorbets, mystery pastries, candied nuts, and some bizarre chocolates. Dan passed on the wasabi-sesame chocolate and the lime leaf chocolate caramels, but took a piece of the chili chocolate bar and a pink-pepper lemongrass truffle, along with vanilla ice cream and mango sorbet. Joe and Heather grabbed a few cookies and left to catch a late movie.

Jacob beckoned Dan over to where he sat, chatted with him for a few minutes, and then abandoned him on the pretext of needing to check on something in the kitchen. As Jacob rose, Kyle sat down across the corner of the table from Dan.

"I don't think we were ever introduced. Kyle Magnusson." A hint of an accent, possibly Southern, lingered in his vowels.

"Dan Zanetti."

“Zanetti? Italian?”

“My dad. Pennsylvania to California to Arizona. Mom is from Mexico, naturalized as a child.”

Kyle picked up a piece of extremely dark chocolate—maybe that scary lime one—and bit into it. “Is your last name why Jacob calls you Z?”

“Sort of. When I started, the firm already had an associate attorney named Daniel Hill, an office manager named Danni, and another Dan on their marketing consultant team. For a while people tried, ‘Dan Z’, but that started getting confused with Danni. So for some of the people, I am either Z, Zanetti, or Dan from Accounting. Jacob just calls me Z because he likes the way it sounds. As long as no one calls me Danilo, I don’t care.”

Kyle glanced at Rebel, now snoozing at Dan’s feet.

“Have you done any obedience training with him?”

Dan shook his head. “Nothing formal. Just the basics. Walk. Sit. Heel. Lie down. My dad wants me to teach him not to bark at squirrels. I swear sometimes the things perch on my parents’ fence just to taunt him. He behaves well for me, but I leave him with my parents while I’m at work.” He stirred his spoon around in the melted remnants of the ice cream and sorbet. “I am afraid their behavior—my parents, not the squirrels—might be inconsistent and confusing. Mom can move quickly from cursing him out to sneaking him treats. And Dad can be moody. But they are doing me a favor by taking him in. I don’t want to crate Rebel all day. That’s not good for him.”

“Definitely not for that long,” Kyle agreed. “Although crate training has its uses, especially if you will be travelling with your dog a lot.”

Jacob rejoined them, and after a short conversation, Kyle excused himself with a “Be right back” and disappeared inside.

“So you and Kyle seem to be hitting it off,” Jacob teased.

Dan shrugged. “We were just talking about dogs.”

Vince, holding his sleeping daughter against his shoulder, came up to say goodnight to Jacob. Leo and Kyle came out onto the patio. Kyle had replaced the sweatshirt with a light black leather jacket. *The jacket looks much badder, I mean better, on Kyle, but the tattoos are still hidden. Damn it.* Dan wanted a chance to examine them now that his initial shock had worn off. Leo sat next to Jacob and squeezed his hand.

Kyle looked at Dan. "Do you have any plans for tomorrow afternoon?"

Dan paused. Were groceries and laundry a plan? Should he make something up? Did he want to?

He had hesitated too long, because Kyle flashed him a quick, wicked smile. "Too late." He handed Dan a piece of paper. "Come here about one o'clock tomorrow afternoon. Do not bring Rebel. Plan to be outside. My cell phone number is on there if you get lost."

"What is it?"

"A surprise." Kyle looked at both Jacob and Leo, perhaps in warning. "You'll like it. But you'll have to come to find out." Then he left.

Dan continued to stare after him, until Jacob cleared his throat.

"He sure has a lot of tattoos." Dan blushed. He had not meant to say that out loud. He waved the paper at Jacob and Leo. "Do you know what this is about?"

Jacob adopted his most innocent expression. "A surprise, Z, didn't you hear? I don't want to spoil it."

Leo chipped in. "You are stuck in a rut, Dan. Time to get moving again. Sometimes that takes a nudge or a push. You don't know Kyle well yet, but you do know Jacob and me. Trust us when we say you can trust him, and take a leap of faith."

Or a leap in the dark, he thought. Who knows what waits on the other side? It took him a moment to recognize the almost-forgotten emotions buzzing through him as anticipation and excitement.

Chapter Three

Tunnel

Dan drove west past the interstate and over the dry Santa Cruz River bed, as the flat city gave way to rolling hills and the linear streets turned into curving roads. Small areas of tight residential communities were interspersed with larger properties that dotted the hills and hugged the washes. He relaxed as he drove, enjoying the scenery and the scents carried on the breeze through his open window. When had he last been out this way?

Visitors to the Sonoran Desert often seemed surprised by the amount of vegetation, but remarked on the monotony of color. Perhaps for much of the year the predominant landscape consisted of various shades of dull, light-green plants and trees against a backdrop of sun-bleached soil. But spring always brought a rainbow array of colors. Didn't spring signify rebirth, renewal, inspiration, hope?

Dan pulled into a turnout, pausing for a moment to take in the scene. Yellow blossoms shone bright on the brittle bushes and a few early-flowering palo verde trees. Large, oversized magenta and pink flowers decorated the prickly pears. Orange flowers burst from the tips of the tall spindly branches of the ocotillo. Many ocotillo grew higher even than the saguaros that had stood for centuries, arms reaching up towards the sun, like silent sentries standing guard over the desert. The silvery-white spines of the teddy-bear cholla gleamed in the sunlight, inviting the unwary to come and touch. Dan spotted clumps of coyote fur clinging to a cholla branch. As Dan watched, he saw a lizard running up a young mesquite tree, cactus wrens and hummingbirds darting around, butterflies flitting from plant to plant, and a Harris hawk perching on a pole, surveying the ground below.

How could anyone think the desert boring or lifeless? People just didn't have the patience to sit and look, to search out the hidden colors. Was Kyle patient? Would he wait for the real Dan to emerge from underneath a pile of family issues and repressed emotions, and would he like what he uncovered? *And why am I obsessing about a man I only met once? Maybe we won't even get along today.*

Dan resumed driving until he spotted a post with colorful balloon dogs tied to it, above an arrow pointing to the right. He obediently turned onto a private

lane that ended between two pillars. Fuchsia bougainvillea plants grew up against the fence on either side. A large permanent sign announced obedience and agility training, along with a name, credentials, a website, and a phone number. Iron bar gates, one decorated with a sitting dog, the other with a dog jumping over a creek, had been opened to allow visitors to enter.

He followed more arrow signs and soon pulled into a crowded gravel parking lot at the back of the property. He got out of his car, gazing around in amazement. The seeming chaos took several minutes to resolve into some semblance of order. In the center of the activity, portable aluminum bleachers rested on three sides of a large rectangular area. However, people stood between him and a clear view of what was inside.

At the end of the parking lot, a registration table stood under a tent. Dan spotted an itinerary on the corner and picked it up. He had missed morning classes on the pipe tunnel, the collapsed tunnel, and the dogwalk, whatever that meant. As well as ring time for eight inches, twelve inches, and sixteen inches. Dan assumed the measurements referred to dogs, but who knew. He was just in time to take A-frame and hurdles classes and learn how to read a course map, should he so desire. And soon he would be able to watch the twenty-inch something or other. Below the events was a price list based on number of events and membership in Pima Agility and Obedience.

“May I help you?” asked the woman behind the table.

“Um... maybe. I'm looking for Kyle Magnusson. He invited me to come here today.”

“Try the east practice area. I think he was helping with the A-Frame class.” She gestured to the area to the right of the bleachers.

Dan headed in the indicated direction, stopping to gaze into the rectangular “ring”. He tried to make sense of what he was seeing. It took a minute for his brain to process the eclectic assortment of equipment: jumps of several configurations, some isolated, others in a line; a tire suspended vertically; a line of narrow vertical poles; a see-saw; a plastic tunnel; a narrow board with a horizontal area in the middle and ramps to the ground at either end; a wide blue-and-yellow A-frame; a small square platform raised off the ground, and a long piece of fabric lying on the ground, with a short, barrel-shaped opening at one end.

Dogless people wandered around the ring, looking at sheets of paper. Dan saw a similar piece tacked to the outside of the ring near the entrance and

looked at the various squiggles and symbols and numbers, trying to match them to what he saw inside. Finally, he shrugged and continued on his way.

Behind the ring, two large ramadas provided shade for picnic tables and camp chairs. About forty yards away from either side of the ring, colored rope strung between poles designated other work areas. In each area stood several pieces of similar-style equipment of different sizes or heights. Not all areas seemed to be in use, while groups of people clustered around others. Past the farthest ramada, an array of pet tents and foldable pet crates spread out like a colorful undersized campground.

Dan finally spotted Kyle, standing inside one of the practice areas watching as a teen urged her black lab up one of the larger A-frames, several times, in both directions. A quick word of praise from Kyle, and the girl smiled as she leashed her dog and rejoined the people and dogs waiting just outside the area. The next dog, a brown poodle, seemed to need encouragement from its handler to touch the yellow area at the bottom of the descent, although Dan wasn't certain why that was important. Evidently jumping over the yellow area as a result of eagerness to finish was considered a bad move. Dan watched as more dogs and people took their turns, noting that only one dog at a time was allowed to be off leash.

"Okay, folks, it's almost one thirty. Time for the next group to take their turns in the ring. If you prefer to practice instead of watching, please remember to be courteous and take turns." Most of the class participants led their dogs away.

Kyle looked around and Dan knew the second Kyle spotted him, because he smiled broadly and crossed the distance between them in a few quick strides. Today, Kyle wore a sage T-shirt sporting a silhouette of a dog leaping over a hurdle above the words "Pima Agility and Obedience" and "STAFF", khaki shorts and cap, and garish multi-colored all-terrain shoes. A silver dog biscuit stud gleamed in one ear and a little silver dog in the other.

"You made it! Have you ever seen a dog agility show before?"

"Maybe in passing, on TV. Not since getting Rebel, so I never paid attention."

"Come watch." Kyle led Dan over to the bleachers, and they climbed up into an upper tier. "This isn't a real competition. Agility Fun Day. Today is geared mostly towards less experienced dogs and handlers. We combine classes for newer members with a full ring setup for those wanting practice in a

competition-like environment. It's a good day for people who have questions or want feedback from more experienced handlers. These events are also used, both to recruit new members, and as fundraisers to maintain equipment and sponsor more events."

Kyle pointed out the names of the obstacles, describing the order and directions in which they ideally needed to be performed today. However, he qualified that with, "Not every dog here is trained on all the obstacles yet. So some people will modify the course to suit their dogs. They might choose to do one obstacle multiple times, or run a shortened version of the course in both directions. As long as both handler and dog get some experience and have fun, it doesn't matter."

"How often does this happen?"

"Usually once every four to six weeks from September to April for these outside events. In the summer it's too damned hot to be standing around in the sun for hours. Inside, they hold regular classes that focus on just one or two obstacles, which alternate days and times to accommodate people's schedules. And there's an indoor ring that is available for member use at set times, with height and layout changing regularly. It's all posted online. Many people buy or build their own agility equipment to practice with at home, but taking classes and participating in events is useful. Besides getting your dog used to traveling, behaving in large groups of dogs, and competing is critical for anyone wanting to do this for more than just fun."

Dan cheered on the dogs, laughing at some of their antics after they finished the course. He watched the handlers, listening to the commands and observing the gestures they used to direct the dogs. Not everyone used the same commands. He was aware of Kyle next to him, occasionally glancing his way.

"So, what did you think?" Kyle asked, after the last dog in the group had finished the course, and they watched as several people worked efficiently to reset the course for the next height class.

"Seems like fun. Complicated, but fun."

"No one learns everything all at once. Not dogs, not people. It takes time and effort. And lots of patience. More so with some breeds of dogs than others."

"How long have you been doing this?"

"I started when I was sixteen." Kyle looked pensive, absently rubbing a tattoo of a black-and-white dog on his lower right arm. He gestured to a small

knot of teenagers. "I like working with teens, getting them interested early. Even if they don't stick with it, they will be better dog people in the future."

He moved abruptly, jumping off the bleachers. "Let me show you around." He pointed out the two "dog-walking" areas and led Dan into the building that had once housed an indoor riding ring but now was used for dog classes. It also held a small canine first-aid station and three unisex bathrooms—one of them wheelchair accessible, an extra sink, and a storage area for equipment and chairs. A pet shower area was located outside the building.

"How much did all this cost?"

Kyle shrugged. "No clue. My understanding is Miriam Ibarra—she's the owner, you saw her out by the ring—inherited the property in the early nineties. Sold all the horses. She bred dogs for a while, but became more interested in training dogs for competition. Many of her dogs, or dogs she has trained for others, are highly ranked in the USDAA and AKC agility rankings. She also trains for AKC obedience trials." Kyle gestured towards a wall of photos of dogs, both close-ups and action shots from dog competitions.

Dan admired the display and looked at the array of ribbon winners and other competitors spanning nearly two decades.

Kyle continued, "She must be at least breaking even with the classes. I know she charges a lot for private classes and serious competitive training. And for the big events, those held off-site that the general public attends, she often gets sponsors from the local pet stores or pet supply vendors or other organizations."

They went back outside and took shelter in the closest ramada. Dan took a seat at one of the picnic tables as Kyle poured two glasses of water from the cooler. Kyle pulled off his cap and tossed it on the table, running his fingers through his sweaty hair. He pulled a couple of slightly squished energy bars from his pocket. He offered one to Dan, who cautiously opened it.

After taking a moist, yet dehydrating, bite and rinsing it down with large mouthful of water, Dan asked, "Do you have a dog right now?"

Kyle's face lit up. "Kiko." He took a smartphone from his other pocket and, like any proud parent, showed a series of pictures of a mostly-white bull terrier with a few scattered black patches. "She came with me this morning, but I took her home at lunchtime. She's not the fastest agility dog ever, but she listens to cues and loves to perform."

“How time-consuming is the training? I have... family obligations.”

“Depends on you and your dog. You don't want to overwhelm beginners—dogs or people—or make training seem like a chore. Also, Rebel is still less than a year, right?”

“Ten months.”

“A lot of dogs shouldn't start jumping with much height until they are at least a year. Besides, the first step isn't agility, but basic obedience on and off the leash. Especially off. Why don't I teach you some basics to work on gradually, and you can practice at home, maybe a little each day?”

“How much will it cost?”

“For you, nothing. At least not unless you want to join the club eventually. I was thinking you could come over to my house. Maybe once on weekends, and perhaps another evening during the week.”

Dan looked at Kyle in surprise. The man seemed sincere. His eyes flicked down to the dog tattoo and back up to the man's face. Was Kyle just offering to help him train Rebel, or was Kyle interested in *him*? Was Kyle even gay? Had he guessed Dan was, or had Jacob or Leo told him? And what about his family? Dan had a duty to them. Jacob's words from the day before came back to haunt him: “*When was the last time you did something fun, just for you?*”

The question had apparently lit the embers of the fire of rebellion. *I deserve to have a life. And I want this. And I want Rebel to have it.* And, if he were honest with himself, he wanted to get to know Kyle better, too. Much better.

Chapter Four

Dogwalk

Dan pulled up the weeds poking through the gravel in his parents' front yard. He wondered what it would be like to live in a climate where people had grass lawns in their yards and had to mow them on a regular basis. Probably more tedious than periodic weeding. Dan felt eager, full of anticipation. He wanted to finish this chore, grab some lunch, and head over to Kyle's.

As Dan worked, he sang along, probably off-key, to the latest album from The Fray. Rebel lounged in the sun nearby, gnawing contentedly on a new rawhide bone. So far, the dog didn't seem to realize he was on the hated tie-out. Dan didn't trust Rebel to stay put if an enticing scent teased his canine nose. He knew all too well from his research, and even Rebel's own past, that beagles readily followed scents for miles, oblivious to dangers such as roads and cars. Fortunately his dog's sense of melody and tune were not as discriminating as his sense of smell.

A shadow fell over him, and he looked up from his kneeling position as his mother approached. He paused the music and pulled out his earbuds.

"Dan, I've been thinking," she began.

Oh no. Conversations that begin this way are never good.

"About what?" he asked cautiously.

"I think Tara should stay in Tucson for college. I want you to tell her she should go the U of A."

Fuck, fuck, FUCK! NO! NO! We already had this battle. Dan stabbed the weeder violently into the ground, then let go before he pulled it out and hurt someone.

Rebel, sensing his tension, dropped his bone and whined.

Dan stood, kicking aside the kneeling pad, so that he was looking down at his mother rather than up at her.

"Mom, she's already accepted the offer at ASU." Dan and Tara had worked hard to convince their parents to allow Tara to go to Barrett, the Honors College at Arizona State University in Tempe. Dan would do whatever it took to ensure his sister at least could experience college unencumbered by parental

oversight. "She has a scholarship and financial aid and the money from Dad's parents. She even has an inexpensive place to stay with Aunt Nicci."

"I don't want her so far away. I'd worry about her. I'd rather have her at home than with Nicci."

You realized you don't want to lose your in-home assistant. And you hate Nicci this week.

"Mom, she'll be less than two hours away. Tara has straight A's. She's brilliant at science. She's been developing original and winning science fair projects since she was twelve. She's earned this chance. She deserves it." *One of us has to escape.* "She can take care of herself. She won't get in trouble." *But if she does, I hope she has fun doing it.* "And Aunt Nicci's a biochemical engineer. She understands Tara's nerdy scientific stuff better than the rest of us ever will, including Dad."

"I think you should care more about what could happen to your sister."

Me? Me care? I drove Tara to high school every day for two years because you were too stoned on pain meds or sleeping pills or antidepressants to be reliable or trusted behind the wheel of a car. Hell, I even drove her to medical appointments and to hang out with her friends. I made sure her school paperwork was in order. I taught Tara to drive.

He contemplated lying to his mother and telling her Tara had missed the application deadline for the U of A. Instead, he looked around for a distraction.

"Want me to prune the lantana? It's looking scraggly. If I cut it back, say about a third, it should look nice and bushy in just a couple of weeks. And what about the bougainvillea? Do you like the out-of-control look, or do you want it more contained?"

As his mother turned to inspect the yard, Dan worked out a plan.

I need to call Aunt Nicci and warn her Mom might call to say Tara won't be coming after all. And not to believe her. I doubt she would. She has no patience with Dad or Mom at the moment. If Aunt Nicci could help settle things, he would have one more reason to be grateful to her.

Dan was not in a particularly good mood when he pulled into Kyle's driveway three hours later. Frustrated and discouraged, definitely. After completing the yard work, he returned home and stretched out on the couch.

Both cats snuggled up against him within minutes, while Rebel dozed on the floor nearby. He had first called Aunt Nicci, and after some hesitation, Tara. Aunt Nicci uttered some cutting but true statements about his parents and promised Tara her support. He tried not to feel as if he were betraying his parents with that phone call. Tara engaged in a mercifully short bout of teenage hysterics before she calmed, and they concocted a basic plan to thwart any moves Mom was likely to make, especially before determining Dad's position. Dan was not sure whether to be reassured or scared when his sister warned him she would try to think of some other ideas.

Although Dan had thought about canceling on Kyle, he knew if he did not go this first time, he would find it all too easy to never go. Plus, he couldn't do much with scent training and hunting in Tucson, at least not with his time constraints and family commitments, even though he knew those were both activities at which beagles excelled. Agility training might be something else Rebel would enjoy, even if it did not involve his nose. And it would give Dan an excuse to see Kyle again. He didn't think he could bear not seeing where this... whatever... with Kyle went.

Kyle's house was located east of Tucson, just past the city limits, up an isolated road that ended on the west side of the Tucson Mountains in a small group of moderately expensive homes spaced out on large hillside lots. Dan realized Kyle lived not too far from the PAO facility of the day before, although much higher in elevation. As Dan stood outside his car, he looked back out over the city in the distance. Odd. He was perhaps no more than fifteen minutes from downtown and twenty-five minutes from the University, yet so far from the chaos and the noise. He unbuckled Rebel's harness from the car restraint and let him scramble out.

Dan led Rebel up a flagstone path curving gently through a carefully-groomed front yard featuring purple prickly pear, yellow-spined round barrel cacti, a saguaro, an octopus agave, and two Mexican bird-of-paradise plants, all rising from a sea of desert-red gravel. Lavender and white verbena spilled out of a large shallow concrete planter. An egg-shaped hummingbird feeder hung in front of the large window overlooking the yard.

Dan rang the doorbell. Several barks sounded from within, either in warning or greeting. A few seconds later, Kyle opened the front and screen doors to let them in. The two dogs engaged in customary butt-sniffing get-to-know-you behavior. Dan immediately noticed that Kyle wore another tank, this one of blue mesh, but instead of ogling the tattoos, Dan met Kyle's gaze.

As Kyle greeted Dan, he gave him an assessing glance. "We'll be discussing some rules as we go along. Rule One is don't try to train when you are angry or impatient or rushed. You won't be in the right mood, and you don't want your dog to think you are mad at him. You need to be able to spend some quality time together. Bad day?"

"Family stuff." Dan sighed, hoping Kyle wouldn't call the afternoon off.

"Before we start with the dogs, maybe you should try to de-stress." Kyle looked at the dogs. Rebel was eagerly exploring new scents, within the limited range of the leash. Kiko had retreated a few paces, standing protectively over a toy ball made from interlocking, rainbow-colored rubber rings. At a signal from Kyle, Dan unleashed Rebel, who immediately followed his nose across the room. Kiko picked up the toy and trotted down the hall.

"She's going to bury it in one of her blankets or hide it under the daybed. The dogs should be all right, but we'll keep an ear out."

Kyle led Dan past the living area and down a hall. Kyle stopped in a laundry/utility room to scrounge a clean pair of exercise shorts and a threadbare tee from a drying rack. After handing them to Dan, Kyle pushed open the door to the hallway bathroom, "Put those on and join me in the last room on the left."

Dan obeyed before joining Kyle in a room which apparently doubled as an office and workout room. Free weights and books were stacked side-by-side on the floor, except for a rogue dumbbell being used to hold down a stack of papers on the desk. Dan did not have time to look at the books before Kyle unfolded two blue exercise mats on the floor. Kyle's method of lowering Dan's stress and putting him in a calmer mood involved leading him through a short warm-up, making him do a seemingly endless number of sit-ups and pushups, hold side planks until his whole body trembled with the effort, and then showing him a series of slow stretches. By the time Dan finally lay on his back, panting, his anger and tension had dissipated.

"Feel better?"

Dan took a few deep breaths. "Mentally, yes. I think the rest of my body is going to hurt pretty badly. Do you moonlight as a gym instructor?"

Kyle laughed. "No, I moonlight as a dog trainer. Speaking of which, shall we get started before the dogs stage a coup? Or start fighting?"

"I don't think Rebel would know how to stage a coup. My cats on the other hand... a definite possibility. Maat has the regal bearing to be a figurehead

monarch and Nisaba has the devious cunning to be the power behind the throne.” Dan sat up, feeling much looser, especially in the muscles he had used while gardening.

As Kyle stood and stretched his arms overhead, Dan noticed the outline of nipple rings on his chest. *Oh God.* Rings in addition to all his other piercings? Dan knew he had been distracted when he arrived, but how had he missed those?

In the kitchen, Kyle filled two tumblers with ice and added water. Then he reached into an upper cupboard and pulled out two bags of small dog treats. He put one in his pocket and handed the other to Dan.

“You will need to figure out what treats your dog likes. Rebel may have different favorites than Kiko. Always carry them with you when you train. I use different treats for training than for other times, but it’s probably not necessary. But you don’t want to rely only on treats. Praise and affection are necessary, too, and often need to replace treats. No treats are allowed in the ring during competition.”

Outside, Dan and Kyle sat at a table on a flagstone patio, drinking their water and talking about some of the early stages of training while Rebel enthusiastically explored all the new scents, and trotted eagerly around the large dirt yard, with frequent pauses for more prolonged sniffing. Kiko gave Kyle a “how-could-you?” look, before she followed Rebel.

“Is she keeping him company or guarding her turf?” Dan asked.

“Maybe some of each. If they spend enough time together, they should eventually accept each other. Kiko is social enough with other dogs away from home, she’s just not used to them in her territory.”

Dan examined the fencing separating the large dog-accessible area of the backyard from the lot beyond. The fence, some sort of decorative black welded-wire mesh, seemed so much nicer than the basic overly-shiny chain-link fence surrounding his rental. Beyond the fence, he saw a couple of large, caged garden areas. Other than that, the land appeared undeveloped, perhaps just cleared of obviously dead and flammable underbrush. The only vegetation within the fenced area was a grapefruit tree and a lemon tree.

“How much land do you have? You must get a lot of wildlife.” Dan decided not to speculate on how this man, probably not too much older than him, could afford a house like this one.

“Just under two acres. Mostly hillside, as you can see. I cleared a rough path up to the ridgeline. I see all the usual birds, of course. Quail, doves, cactus wren. I have hummingbird and finch feeders set up.” Kyle gestured farther up the hill towards the next property. “One of my neighbors is a birder, keeps a bird diary of what he sees in his yard and around the neighborhood. He would know some of the less common species. I see at least one javelina herd regularly. I hear coyotes more than I see them. Occasionally I see mule deer and rabbits—mostly desert cottontail, I think. And several species of lizards, even a horned lizard once. But the rarest thing I ever saw was a desert toad, last summer after a monsoon. The thing was huge. Bigger than a grapefruit.” Kyle held out his hands far enough apart to encompass a cantaloupe.

Dan might have thought he exaggerated, except that he had seen the toads himself. “I hope Kiko wasn’t with you. Those toads have enough toxins in their skin to kill a dog that picks it up or even licks it.”

After Kyle and Dan judged Rebel had explored enough to be willing to pay attention for a while, they leashed the dogs. Kyle pulled a chair up to the edge of the patio and had Kiko sit next to him.

“Show me what you already know.”

Dan and Rebel went through three rounds of heel, walk, sit, down, and stand on the leash. Then Dan unleashed Rebel, and they demonstrated stay and come. Kyle watched impassively. Then he traded places with Dan. He led an unleashed Kiko through the same moves, with a series of vocal commands combined or reinforced with gestures.

Since the next rule was not to do too much at once, especially at the beginning, they stopped after a short while. The men went inside, leaving the door open enough that the dogs could come and go.

“You both did a good job today,” Kyle commented, as he pulled a plastic container out of the cupboard and passed it to Dan. He grinned and winked. “Your treat.”

Dark chocolate chip almond cookies? Dan took one, polished it off too quickly, and took a second to savor.

“Do you have to be anywhere else this evening? I know you have family obligations.”

Dan shook his head. “Not tonight.”

“Then stay for dinner.”

Dan sat at the kitchen island as Kyle began pulling bowls from the fridge without even waiting for a response. Kyle must have done most of his prep work ahead of time, because he did not spend much time chopping up anything except some herbs. Soon, he had three different sauté pans on the stove top. Tantalizing smells kept Dan glued to his seat, as he watched in fascination—not only at the food on the stove and Kyle being domestic, but at the tattoos.

Finally, finally, he had the opportunity to observe them as Kyle was otherwise occupied. On the back and front of his right arm: the black-and-white dog—Dan saw the “white” was actually bare, uncolored skin—in two different poses, and a ribbon and a trophy with some writing on them. On his right shoulder and bicep: a portrait of a middle-aged man with some family resemblance to Kyle. On his left arm: animals and symbols from a mix of cultures—Celtic, Egyptian, and Chinese or Japanese at a minimum—nestled in among a full sleeve of colored swirls and abstract designs.

Dan frowned. Hadn't Kyle had a tattoo on his left hand on Friday night? He looked again, checking out the right hand as well. No sign of a tattoo on either hand, or even tattoos anywhere below the cuff line. He tried to remember if he had noticed Kyle's hands yesterday. Could a person just lose tattoos?

“Did you have more tattoos on Friday?” The words rushed out before his brain could censor them.

Kyle shot him an enigmatic glance, then grinned. “Yep. I save the hands and wrists for customizable temps. So I can put on a long-sleeved shirt and look respectable when I need to, and enjoy variety and change when I don't. Sometimes, I even put them on my neck or face.” Kyle looked down as he mixed seasonings into his vegetables. “If you want to try a temp tattoo sometime, let me know. We can sneak it in somewhere it won't be seen at work. I have a good assortment.”

Dan swallowed, mouth suddenly dry. He had no idea how intimate applying a temporary tattoo was, probably not very, but just the idea of Kyle putting one on him set his heart racing. And actually wearing it, hidden under his clothes, when he was at work or eating dinner with his family, a secret only they knew... He reached for his water glass and drained it.

Dan let Kyle refill his water, and waved off the suggestion of wine or beer.

“Are you willing to talk about your family? Or should I mind my own business?”

Dan contemplated for a minute, thinking. He had not known Kyle for long, true, but he felt a connection. And probably trust. Or was that lust?

“Will you tell me about your tattoos?”

Kyle smiled. “Eventually. Maybe not tonight, though. Each one tells part of a story. But I will tell you when the time is right.”

Dan nodded. And as meat and vegetables and rice sizzled, as spices and cooking aromas mingled and teased the air, Dan told Kyle about his mother and her first husband, about his parents’ marriage, about Sergio, and the barest outline of the accident. He didn’t mention his dashed dreams.

“So because Sergio was a fuck-up as a kid, you got saddled with an overly-developed sense of responsibility and a desire to please?”

Dan blinked. “Um. Something like that. I wouldn’t have used those exact words.”

“What about your other siblings? What do they do? Isn’t your younger brother old enough to help?”

Sighing, Dan shook his head. “Sometimes I am astonished Rafael can even take care of himself. He’s a musician. Plays both alto and tenor sax. He went to a high school with a decent music program, at least.”

“You didn’t all go to the same school?”

“Tara and I both tested into UHS.”

“Where?”

“University High School.”

Kyle shook his head. “I’m not a local.”

Dan laughed. “It’s one of the top, free college-prep schools in the country. You have to take a test to get in.” He paused. “It’s an excellent school, and an honor to be accepted. Dad took it for granted that we would all get in, but Rafael didn’t even bother trying. Knew he couldn’t handle the work. His talent is in music, not academics.”

“Not everyone excels at academics, even within the same family.”

“I know, but Dad was disappointed. Anyhow, Rafael might be a musical genius, but he has less financial sense than a flea. Actually, probably less common sense most of the time, too. He managed to get his girlfriend pregnant

while still in high school and moved in with her just before the accident. So he escaped our parents' house before me."

"Ouch. I bet that stung."

"You have no idea." *Of course, the mere fact Rafael had a girlfriend also irritated me, because it meant my younger brother had a much better and less secretive sex life than I did.* "And yes, I was jealous he got out of the house. He used the excuse of supporting Adrianna through her pregnancy for not helping much with our parents and Tara. Although, I think Adrianna's extended family did most of the supporting of both of them. When Rafael did come to the hospital, he often had Adrianna and her mother Carmen in tow, since Carmen acted as their chauffeur at the time. Adrianna was calm enough, but her mother is very dramatic and loud and given to insulting everyone in Spanish. And she doesn't particularly like men."

Kyle started plating the food.

"Now that I think about it, maybe Rafael didn't benefit much by moving in two houses down from his mother-in-law." Dan smiled at the thought.

"Probably not."

"Within three years of graduating from high school, Rafael fathered two children he could barely afford to support. He is twenty-two now. He takes music courses at Pima Community College and plays gigs in a jazz band at local events. He supplements his income as a waiter for a catering company. Adrianna managed, mostly with the help of her own mother and sisters, to juggle caring for the children with attending hairdressing and cosmetology classes. Now that she has her license, she works part-time at a local salon. She, at least, has a grasp on financial reality, but it doesn't help much when Rafael's tastes exceed his income, and he has no concept of restraint or self-denial."

Kyle put the plates down on a nearby table. "I imagine you have had to become very good at both restraint and self-denial."

Don't think about self-denial. Don't think about self-denial. "Um. Yes."

Dan distracted himself from thoughts of everything he denied himself by taking a bite of the food. Flavors zinged across his taste buds. "Wow! I can't believe you cooked this. If I hadn't watched you, I would be asking where you bought it." Dan loved curry, although it was not a spice he cooked with himself. Fresh zucchini, broccoli, red and yellow peppers, mushrooms, and currants, lightly sautéed with minced ginger and garlic and maybe a hint of citrus. And a rice blend with an element Dan couldn't quite figure out.

“What’s in this rice?”

“A fifty-fifty mix of brown rice and riced cauliflower.”

“Cauliflower, really?” Although Dan could taste it now he knew it was there. “More vegetables. Sneaky.”

The dogs wandered in together, Kiko leading the way. Dan was surprised when Rebel, often a bottomless pit, didn’t immediately beg for food. Instead, he dropped down near Dan and rested his head against Dan’s leg.

“So your sister attends the same prep school you went to?”

“Yeah.” Dan described Tara’s college dilemma without mentioning his mother’s former addiction issues.

“Nothing wrong with living with an aunt or an uncle.”

“No. I don’t know Aunt Nicci too well—I don’t think she likes Dad a lot of the time. She once told me that she had settled in Phoenix, rather than Tucson, when she decided she could not tolerate another long cold winter. She claimed she wanted warmth, but hated the humidity of Florida. However, she said one hundred miles was about as close to her younger brother as she could tolerate for more than a few days.”

Kyle burst out laughing.

“Personally, I think she just followed her lover there. Although I am not sure she can tolerate him all the time, either. They have been not-living-together in separate residences in three cities for close to twenty years. Anyhow, she didn’t care for us kids much when we were small, but we became closer to her as we got older. Tara is the one she really likes.” Dan ate a few more bites, savoring the food as he thought about his aunt. “Nicci can be blunt and often acerbic. But in the aftermath of the accident, she was the first one to help us out.”

Other relatives had floated in and out with high emotions and drama and dire predictions. Completely unhelpful. Throughout those first couple of weeks, Nicci had been a welcome voice of sanity and calm. “She is used to living alone, yet she volunteered to open her home to Tara. So even though she often irritates me, I still appreciate her.”

Maybe now more than ever. The last time he had seen her around Christmas, she had said “*Stiffen your spine, Dan, and stop coddling everyone.*

They should be perfectly capable of fending for themselves most of the time.”
Maybe he should have listened.

Chapter Five

Tire Jump

Dan racked his weights and found a corner to stretch in. Thirty minutes on the treadmill and another thirty with strength training had put him in an excellent mood. Time to pick up Rebel and walk the dog around his parent's neighborhood, then head home and feed and play with the cats. Maybe he could get Tara to walk with him and Rebel, see how things had gone with Mom.

Jacob intercepted him before he could reach the locker room.

"Did you have a good time Friday?"

Was that only three days ago? "Excellent. Thanks for the invite and the persuasion. I'm glad I went." Dan paused. "How long were you planning it, really?"

Jacob adopted his best angelic look. "What, you don't believe all those people just happened to have no other plans on a Friday night?" Dan gave him a skeptical look, and Jacob relented. "A couple of weeks. But you were always on the invitation list. I just tried a new tactic."

They both laughed.

"So how was your date, um, day with Kyle?"

"My afternoon with Kyle at the dog agility event went just fine. It was not a date." *Although yesterday may have been, sort of?* "How long have you known Kyle?"

"Since soon after he moved here. Maybe three and a half years?"

"Is he, you know, gay?" Dan thought Kyle was, but wanted to make sure he wasn't imagining signals.

"Yes. And before you turn red thinking of how to ask, he is also single. He was casually involved for a couple of years with a co-worker of Leo's, that's how we met him, but Brad deserted him for greener pastures in the big city last spring. And he wasn't right for Kyle, really. A decent man, but not an animal person deep down, and he resented the time Kyle spent training Kiko and teaching agility classes. We kept Kyle as a friend after Brad left."

"Kyle is going to help me train Rebel. First obedience and later agility."

Jacob grinned. "Awesome! When are you seeing him again?"

"Wednesday." Dan felt proud he managed this without even a blush. "Kyle said he and Kiko will be near my part of town on Wednesday afternoons. We are tentatively aiming for one weekend day at his house and Wednesdays at mine. So I don't have to drive so far on a weeknight."

He paused as a thought occurred to him. "I didn't even consider Maat and Nisaba! Damn. Rebel grew up with them as the dominant pets. I wonder how they will feel about Kiko. I need to go research bull terriers and cats."

Rebel greeted Kyle and Kiko with a friendly woof and showed no sign of aggression towards the other dog.

The cats growled and hissed. Nisaba's tail bristled, doubling in size, as she arched her back, but she stood her ground. Maat retreated, pacing back and forth, tail swishing with agitation. She hissed occasionally, willing to attack if needed.

Kiko, held firmly to Kyle's side, took the hostility in stride. She was probably used to the posturing and tantrums of other animals, more so than the cats were to strange dogs.

Dan picked up Nisaba, trying to soothe her even as she struggled. Eventually she responded slightly to his petting and comforting words, especially as Kiko made no threatening moves. After several uncomfortable minutes, Kyle and Kiko continued through the house and out into the backyard, where Dan and Rebel joined them.

After some thought, Dan had decided not to try to bribe the cats with food to calm them down. He didn't want them to associate snacks with this behavior, even if it was perfectly normal, instinctive, and probably a smart reaction to a strange animal. And Kiko, while small for a bull terrier, was significantly larger than the cats and Rebel.

Dan showed Kyle how Rebel had improved since Sunday with the off-leash commands, even lying down and staying down for specified periods of time. The cats watched suspiciously through the window.

Kyle went back to his car for a short, straight piece of tunnel, nothing nearly as long as the curved tunnels the dogs used in competition.

"With a short tunnel, they can see the other end. Start by getting him used to going through."

Kyle had Kiko go through it a couple of times, as Dan watched. “Kiko, tunnel.” She trotted through.

“Eventually you need the dog to enter from whichever side you indicate. For now, though, try to just get Rebel to go through. Have him stay at one end, then go to the other and call him through with *come*. Later, you can work on the association with the word *tunnel* or *through*. For now, you want him to learn the idea of going through. We will work up to longer, straight tunnels and shorter, curved tunnels gradually.”

Fortunately, the beginner tunnel did not faze Rebel. He came through willingly, many times, enjoying the praise and the treats. After the lessons ended, and they turned the dogs loose to play, Kyle reached into the pocket of the jacket slung across the back of his chair. He pulled out a zipped plastic bag containing dog-shaped shortbread cookies and handed them to Dan.

“What’s this for?”

Kyle grinned. “Your reward for doing well.”

Dan laughed. “Am I supposed to bark or wag my tail?”

“Only if you want me to question your sanity. Actually, I made a batch for a fundraising event. But I thought you would appreciate a few.”

Dan turned away to pet Rebel and to hide his expression. It had been a long time since someone had taken care of him, a long time since anyone outside of work said “well done”. Most of his family seemed to take everything he did for granted. Emotions swelled in him. Dan felt unwanted tears threatening. He blinked them back. This was supposed to be a light-hearted moment, sharing a joke, not him dissolving into a mess because a sexy man was nice to him and thought of giving him a token gift.

He wasn’t sure how well he could do with the hopeful-puppy look, but he turned back to Kyle and tried, even cocking his head like Rebel. “Do I get treats even if I don’t do well?”

“You’ll have to wait and see.”

“I’d return the favor, but my kitchen doesn’t lend itself to baking cookies. I know where to buy excellent local ice cream and gelato, though.”

Leaving the dogs out in the yard with plenty of water, Dan and Kyle went inside.

Dan put on water for pasta and handed Kyle an open can of cat food and showed him the long shelf where he had made cutouts for the food bowls to rest

in, so the cats couldn't shove the bowls off while they ate. "I used to feed them on the floor, but the cats like to savor their food. At least Nisaba does. And I didn't want Rebel eating theirs. He'll eat anything he can reach."

At the merest clink of spoon to can, the cats were underfoot, plaintively meowing about their starvation, the stress over a new dog in their territory forgotten. "Put a quarter of the can in each bowl. Then pet them each a few times, so they get used to you."

"Hope they don't bite me." Nisaba, who always meowed the loudest for food, ate her usual three bites before turning away, spurning the remainder of the food in the bowl. She leaned into Kyle's touch, purring as he stroked her head and scratched behind her ears, raising her head so he could caress her under the chin. Her eyes closed to sleepy half-slits.

Meanwhile, Maat finished gulping her portion down as if she would never see food again. She came over, seeking her share of affection. Kyle turned his attention to her. "Wow! Her fur is so soft. I've never felt anything like this." He seemed entranced as he ran his fingers through the gray fur. "The angora rabbit of the cat world."

"Have you ever felt an angora rabbit?"

"Well, no. But I imagine they would feel like this. Has her fur always been this soft?"

"Ever since she was a kitten." Dan experienced an odd emotion as he watched Kyle interact with his cats. Not jealousy—he wanted his cats to like Kyle. And at least tolerate Kiko. Dan watched Kyle's hands, one on each cat. Maybe he was feeling envy. He certainly wouldn't object if Kyle wanted to pet and stroke him instead.

"I'll go get dinner together." Dan had cooked an enormous batch of homemade pasta sauce the night before, since it was a dish he knew he cooked well. And it was always better the second night, once the flavors had a chance to mature. He tossed fresh pasta in the boiling water, and as it cooked, he quickly prepared salad with mixed baby greens and cherry tomatoes and parmesan-garlic croutons. He had bought a couple of bottles of wine to have on hand, one red, one white. He would let Kyle pick.

Kyle loved Dan's pasta. "I can see we are going to spoil each other with our cooking. This is one of the best sauces I've had since leaving Chicago."

Dan smiled, more shyly than he had expected, both at the compliment, and at the implication they would be eating more meals with each other. "Secret

family recipe. Dad taught me when I was in high school. And I managed to weasel a few more recipes from Aunt Nicci as well. I like to cook Italian food. And try my hand at Greek and Middle Eastern fare. And American, of course. My attempts at Chinese never match my expectations. I also love Thai, Vietnamese, and Cuban, but I can't cook them."

Kyle blinked. "Not Mexican?"

"Want to know a secret? I don't cook Mexican if I can avoid it, because it's a family staple. I know how, but my mom cooks it, and my sister-in-law and her family cooks it. Hell, even Jacob and Leo can cook it. I end up having dinner with my parents and Tara more often than I like to admit. My life has no shortage of Mexican food."

"Huh. Never thought of that. I never had much before moving to Tucson, and when I did it was mostly the generic Tex-Mex stuff. Nothing like the variety and quality that I have experienced here. I know there were decent Mexican places where I lived, I just didn't eat at them."

Dan tried to explain the difference between the dishes that originated in different parts of Mexico, finally concluding that Kyle had never had decent *mole* or *pozole*. As Dan had experienced the other night, Kyle liked to cook vegetable-heavy stir fries, but also Irish, Indian, and Polish foods. Some of his favorite restaurants served Thai and Middle Eastern foods. Kyle also liked to mix some organic vegan meals into his diet, and Dan was mildly disturbed by the mention of "green smoothies." Kyle laughed and told him to give the drink a chance before he said no.

"I would love to travel around the world and experience new cuisines," Dan remarked, wistful.

They chatted about favorite and least favorite foods for a while longer, before the topic turned to, what else, their dogs.

"So how did you get Rebel?" Kyle asked. "Didn't you tell me he was a rescue dog? Or maybe Jacob mentioned it."

Dan's smile disappeared. "Poor Rebel." He sighed, took a sip of wine, and looked to where the dogs sprawled on the floor.

"Once upon a time, not so long ago, maybe even as recently as last August, a careless college girl from California wanted a dog to take with her as a pet when she went back to ASU up in Tempe. So her parents bought her a cute little beagle puppy without bothering to learn that maybe a beagle was not the

best type of dog for an apartment or a single room in a shared house. In fact, maybe the parents even lied to the breeder about where the puppy would be living, or ignored what they were told.”

“Idiots.” Kyle sounded disgusted.

“Yep. So the cute, little beagle puppy went off with the college girl, who spoiled him when he was being sweet and yelled at him when he was following his nose and getting into her stuff. And she left him alone in her room in a house she shared with other girls, and he got lonely and howled mournfully, and bayed, and whined. And didn't understand why everyone yelled at him. And the college girl began to regret having the puppy, but didn't want to admit to her parents she couldn't handle him.”

Kyle rolled his eyes, and Dan nodded in agreement.

“About this time, in our fair city of Tucson, another girl was visiting her grandparents, because she wanted to see them before she left to go abroad, with the Peace Corps or some similar organization. While she was visiting them, the older couple reminisced about their dog that had died recently. A Cavalier King Charles spaniel mix with some Boston terrier thrown in. A nice quiet dog, well suited to seniors living in one of those over-fifty-five communities, where the seniors live in small houses—mostly mobile home style—close together on small lots. They missed him, but they had not been planning on getting another dog. The granddaughter didn't know it, but they had been thinking about adopting a middle-aged cat from one of their neighbors.”

“Let me guess. Somehow Peace Corps granddaughter meets California college girl.”

“Exactly, the granddaughter went to Tempe to visit a friend, who was a housemate of California girl. The housemates, including California girl, lied and told Granddaughter that dogs weren't allowed in the house, but she hadn't known that when she brought it with her. The puppy was asleep and looking harmless and cute, and when he awoke, acted playful and cute. And was remarkably quiet. Granddaughter became convinced her grandparents needed this puppy, and without asking them, agreed to take the dog from California girl, even paying her some money for the dog's bed and crate and toys and such.

“After a long ride in a car with a stranger, the poor beagle found himself deposited in the house of two more strangers, with no introduction. A new location, new people. And the grandparents found themselves in possession of a

puppy with little more from Granddaughter than ‘Here’s a present for you. Have to run! See you when I get back.’”

“What a mess. And how thoughtless.”

“The grandparents did their best, but they were no match for an energetic and loud young dog. They tried for a few days. They called their granddaughter, but couldn’t get through to her phone. They had no idea who the original owner was or where the beagle had even come from. They were on the verge of having him taken to Animal Control or the Humane Society or posting a notice online when he escaped their yard, probably following his nose, and disappeared.”

“He’s lucky he didn’t get flattened by a car. Or get overheated.”

“Or killed by a coyote. Fortunately we’d just had rain from the monsoons. He probably found puddles to drink from. The next evening when I went to take out the garbage, I saw him wandering the service road behind my house. Maybe eight miles away from where he had started. He was all scratched up and filthy. No collar, no tags. I brought him inside my yard and called Louise.”

“Jacob’s sister?”

“Yeah. I thought that since she works for a vet she would know what to do. She came over with food and a crate and medical supplies. We bathed him. She checked out his injuries and said they were all superficial. By the time he was dry, he had fallen asleep in my lap. She offered to keep him overnight and take him with her to work in the morning, to get checked out by the vet. I said no, said I would keep him with me. I spent a long time petting him and talking to him. At first, he didn’t like the crate, poor guy, but I didn’t want him running around until I dog-proofed the house, nor did I want him hurting himself or chasing the cats.

“I needn’t have worried about Rebel and the cats. When I got up at two to take him outside, Maat was perched outside the crate watching him and Nisaba was stretched out on top, purring. Not like the way they behaved with Kiko tonight. Maybe they sensed he was injured, or young, or couldn’t hurt them. From the beginning, they treated him like their kitten.”

Kyle grinned. “I would have liked to have seen that, but I can picture it.”

“The next day, I took him to Louise’s vet. The vet checked for more injuries, put some goop on the deeper scratches, and stuck a cone on his head for a few hours. The scan found an ID chip, which got traced back to the

college girl's parents in California. Natasha, do you know her? Our firm's investigator? She volunteered to help and within a couple days pieced together the whole story, after the housemates and the granddaughter's parents all got involved.

"The Tucson couple had never wanted him, although they were relieved he had been found. The college girl no longer wanted him. Her parents wanted to be reimbursed for what they had spent on him. By then, one of the firm's younger lawyers had heard the story, and pointed out that their daughter had sold him to the other young woman and given her all his stuff as well. After they relented, I offered them a token amount just so that I could get his papers."

Kyle smiled, a secret smile, touching his dog tattoo. "Just luck that you were in the right place at the right time to find him. Fate."

Fate? Dan had never thought of it like that. "Well, it wasn't easy. Even though Louise had helped me, she and the vet doubted my ability to handle a beagle pup with my full-time job. A member of one of the dog rescue outfits wanted to take him and place him with a family, because supposedly they would be better for him than just me. I referred them to the law firm. Even my parents questioned whether I should keep him. And the more people who said I couldn't, the more I was determined to. Besides, within a couple of days, he and the cats had bonded. Over the course of one weekend, I made the house as dog-proof as I could, although not enough, of course. Trial and error and experience fixed that.

"In the end, my parents came through for me when I asked them to take care of Rebel during the day, even if just to play with him once in a while and let him outside when he needed to go. And perhaps the unintended consequence is that I believe taking care of Rebel has really helped both my parents, given them something to think about and interact with when they are home all day. Plus, it gets me over there twice a weekday like clockwork, which they appreciate. And while they both complain about him to me from time to time, I know they love him."

Dan checked the level in the wine bottle, thought about having another half glass, then decided against it. He offered the bottle to Kyle, who shook his head. Dan shoved the cork back in.

"After I received his papers, I paid twenty-five dollars to change his registered name with the AKC." He paused, looking at Kyle. "I was still seriously pissed with a lot of people for saying I couldn't do it."

“So what is his official name?”

“Danilo’s Rebellion.”

Kyle laughed. “Perfect. I wasn’t expecting that. And what was his name before?”

Dan looked at where the dogs slept and whispered, “We don’t talk about that.”

Kyle shook his head in mock sympathy. “That horrible, huh? You know, I will get the name from you some day when the dogs aren’t around.”

Sitting up straight, Dan tried to adopt a challenging and stern expression, a task made difficult when he was suddenly hiding amusement and suppressing the urge to grin. “You may try.”

Blue eyes glinted as Kyle silently accepted the challenge.

They cleared the table, and Dan served a simple dessert, just fresh strawberries and vanilla ice cream. With the dog cookies on the side.

Chapter Six

Winged Hurdles

The following Friday night, Dan walked into his parents' house and plunged into a cacophony. Dad had his office door closed, but Dan could hear classical music clearly through the door. In the deserted kitchen, meal preparations had been abandoned, but the TV blared a commercial at twice its normal volume. Dan picked up the remote, turned the sound down to a sensible level, then muted it. Only then could he hear what his mom had sought to drown out. From the den came the sound of several teenage voices, all raised loudly in cheerful but heated debate.

He walked into the den, nearly tripping over a backpack. Had a small library exploded? Textbooks and notebooks and papers were strewn across the room. Tara and four of her classmates were seated around the room, some on chairs, some on the floor. One of the girls sat on the lap of one of the boys in a public display of affection almost guaranteed to give his mom a stroke, especially if it had involved Tara. As it was, she was probably off praying for the pair. Or phoning their parents. The occasional groping did not deter either of the teens from voicing their opinion of whatever topic was being debated, probably something from the AP US Government class.

Dan thought the other girl, Tara's best friend, Eden, and the other boy, whose name Dan could never remember, had both been on the debate team. Any rules of debate etiquette had been thrown out the window and run over multiple times, as everyone talked over each other, proudly displaying a speak-loudest-and-longest strategy.

Tara looked at him, winked, then said to her friends, "Well, we won't agree. Let's talk about the English Lit assignment instead."

A very brief silence followed as one set of textbooks was cast aside, in as disorderly a fashion as possible, in favor of beat-up paperbacks and e-readers. Then they began arguing about a book Dan didn't remember reading, for which he was grateful if everything the teens said about it was true.

Dan opened his mouth to ask them to quiet down, but Tara glared at him and shook her head. Eden saw him, smiled, and waved, and continued explaining why the world in which the story took place portrayed a stereotypical caricature of a dystopian society, but could never happen. Forgot-

His-Name pointed to his T-shirt, emblazoned with the words "Method in Madness". Dan threw up his hands in a surrender gesture and retreated.

Mom was back in the kitchen, wearing ear protection gear of the type worn by shooters or heavy equipment operators. She looked angry and miserable. As soon as she saw Dan, she grabbed his arm and dragged him outside.

"Danilo! Make them be quiet! Tara invited them here to study, but they are so loud."

Dan wasn't sure what to say to pacify his mom and not ruin whatever plan Tara had, especially since he wasn't sure of the point of his sister's little scene.

He mumbled something about seeing what he could do after he checked on Rebel. Then he asked his mom where she had found the ear muffs.

"I borrowed them from Luis next door."

He braved his Dad's office to snag Rebel, who seemed to be oblivious to the chaos, and shooed him outside.

He returned to the office.

"How's Maria holding up?" Dad asked, surprising Dan.

"She borrowed some ear muffs from Luis next door, but she is spitting mad." *Like my cats when they first saw Kiko.*

Dad shrugged. "Why don't you go take Rebel for a walk before you encourage the kids to be on their way?"

"You *want* them to stay?"

"I might be in a wheelchair, Dan, but I am not always blind to what happens around me. Tara's plan needs more time."

You know what her plan is?

Dan wasn't sure if it was amazement or obedience or cowardice that had him taking Rebel for a leisurely walk. When he returned about six, the teens were already packing up and leaving.

"Bye, Ms. Z, thanks for having us over."

"Thanks, Mrs. Zanetti! Hey, Tara, what time are we coming on Sunday again? Was it three or three-thirty?"

"See you Sunday, Tara! Good luck on the calculus!"

Mom cast a desperate glance at Tara. "They are coming back Sunday?"

Dan looked in the den. Even though the books and people were gone, the room was littered with plates and glasses and cookie and chip crumbs.

Tara joined him, grinning. "Don't worry. I'll clean it up once Mom gets a good look at it."

Tara phoned Dan on Sunday afternoon, just as he was getting ready to head to Kyle's.

Please don't let there be a problem. I can't deal with it today.

"Guess what? Mom agreed that I can go to ASU! Well, she agreed again, but this time it's final. She said that Aunt Nicci would be a better person to help me with my studies." He heard giggling in the background. "By which she really means that she hopes my friends and I are as annoying to Nicci as we were to Mom, even though she couldn't say it. So you don't have to worry about that anymore, me going to ASU, that is."

"Um. Good. Glad you took care of the problem."

"Hope you don't mind that I took matters into my own hands, but sometimes you just aren't as good at standing up to Mom and Dad."

Ouch.

"Anyhow, we're supposed to be going to Eden's to study instead of our house, but I think we're going to stop first and grab some pizza to celebrate. Catch you later."

'You just aren't good at standing up to Mom and Dad.' Is that really how she sees me? Is it true? For the second week in a row, Dan headed over to Kyle's in a mixed-up emotional state, but this time he packed his own workout clothes as a precaution.

March turned into April, as yellow blossoms covered more of the palo verde trees that abounded along the washes, in undeveloped areas, in parking lots and along sidewalks. Dan always associated them with the changing of seasons, the transitioning from the pleasant days of spring to the beginning of the pre-summer heat. Kyle remarked that he was still accustomed to regarding yellow trees as a sign of autumn, not spring.

They met without fail twice a week, at Kyle's on Sundays and Dan's on Wednesdays. Sunday afternoons started earlier, and always with the pattern

begun on that first day. A short workout and maybe some meditation exercises to clear the mind, followed by dog training and dinner, and then maybe a little television. Wednesday evenings, they walked the dogs around Dan's neighborhood, although not always together because Kiko liked a more vigorous walk with less sniffing stops than Rebel. Then they brought Kiko through Dan's house and let her and the cats scope each other out, pleased when the cats' antipathy lessened with each visit. More training, slowly growing more advanced. They both played with the cats, although for the first few weeks they shut the cats out of the kitchen and invited the dogs inside while they ate dinner.

During the second week, Dan learned that Kyle was not a full-time, or even a paid, staff member at Pima Agility and Obedience. He helped with some of the beginner group classes as a favor to Miriam, and his "salary" was used for a partial waiver of the fees for some of the poorer teen members.

Nor was Kyle a bartender, or a rock musician, or a biker, or any of the other things Dan had once imagined. His badass leather-wearing tattoo-covered companion was an *assistant professor* at the University of Arizona, in the Speech, Language, and Hearing Sciences Department.

In addition to teaching classes and doing research, he was a trained speech therapist. Kyle said his particular area of interest was on how hearing loss affected speech and language development. While most therapy sessions occurred at the clinic, he made home visits on Wednesday afternoons to a child who had lost much of her hearing between the ages of two and three. She was now six and wore a hearing aid, but she was being home-schooled until her speech improved and she felt comfortable being in a normal classroom environment. She did much better understanding speech and isolating sounds one-on-one than in a larger group.

"She adores Kiko," Kyle said. "Her lessons always go better when I bring Kiko along. Her parents don't mind, since they can't cope with a full-time pet right now."

After that first night, they did not discuss many heavy personal topics. Kyle did volunteer that his interest in his chosen field stemmed from his uncle becoming deaf as a teen, but had not said much else about his past.

They cooked creative meals for each other, talked about music, movies and television, and travel. Kyle had more of a tolerance for music with country influence than Dan, but they both enjoyed many of the current British rock bands. Dan liked more world music, especially Spanish music, which he could

generally understand. Despite loving vocal music, neither of them liked American Idol or similar shows. They both liked some of the popular crime shows, but Dan also liked travel shows, while Kyle leaned more towards science shows.

Dan showed Kyle his collection of travel magazines and the used coffee table books and guides he picked up cheap at the public library book sales. He talked about places he wanted to see, and Kyle, who admitted he had never been outside of the United States either, or to any western state other than Arizona—except for a quick drive-through—joined Dan in discussing the pros and cons of different locations.

Dan loved Kyle's house. Unlike his tiny rental, Kyle's house was large, open, and uncrowded. Dan was used to houses with warm southwestern color schemes—tan, golden-yellow, orange or salmon, possibly dark-red accents, with aqua or forest green featured as the predominate cool color. Kyle had very little southwestern décor, other than a set of five Hopi kachina dolls, the type often given as housewarming gifts. His walls were on the pale blue side of neutral, with accent colors consisting of dark and medium blues, deep greens, and a touch of plum. To Dan, the house felt cool and inviting, soothing on the eyes.

Art consisted mostly of paintings in bold colors and various objects—vases and carvings and such—that looked to Dan's inexpert eye as if they might have been collected a generation or two or three ago. A variety of high-quality wood furniture was distributed throughout the house, some of it showing marks from a teething puppy. An intricate iron daybed—with a sturdy canvas slipcover patterned with dark blue, light blue, green, gray, and rose triangles—rested in a place of honor with an excellent view out the east window. Kyle told Dan it was one of Kiko's favorite lounging spots.

Most houses in the main part of Tucson were single story and without basements, given the prevalent cement-hard caliche layer that discouraged below-ground construction. Because Kyle's house was built on a slope, the main part of his house rested above a small lower story which consisted of a three-car garage, furnace, water heater, a utility sink, and an open area currently being used for storage of all the agility equipment.

The much larger main floor consisted of an east-facing deck directly above the garage, a huge high-ceilinged living room area on the east side of the house which continued unimpeded by walls to a dining area in the northeast corner, and into a large kitchen which overlooked the backyard and hill slope to the

north. The kitchen might not be a professional chef's wet dream, but it was more than ample enough to satisfy any cooking aspirations Dan had ever had, with a cooking island, counter and cabinet space galore, and a spacious, organized pantry. In the west half of the house, the master bedroom and bathroom were in the northwest corner, with a small library in between the bedroom and kitchen. In the middle of the western portion were another bathroom accessible from the south hall, the laundry room, and a giant, cedar-lined, walk-in closet accessible from both hallways—and the master bedroom already had a smaller version! On the south side, were three bedrooms: two sparsely-furnished guest rooms and the room Kyle used as his study.

The one oddity seemed to be a strange hallway-room running along the center of the west side of the house, connecting the north and south hallways. Too wide to be considered a conventional hallway, yet too narrow to be of any use for furniture, it had narrow doorways and a wide, built-in window-seat style bench running its length. An extremely wide windowsill ran the length of the room at chest height.

One day Dan asked Kyle about it.

"You have no idea what this room was used for?" Kyle countered, adopting an enigmatic yet teasing expression. "Here's a hint, the original owners had it custom built."

Dan looked around the room, then out the window across Kyle's side yard, full of Mexican honeysuckle and Baja fairy duster and other butterfly and hummingbird attracting plants, and up the hill towards the neighboring house. "Other than maybe plants on the windowsill, not really. Unless they hung religious art on the wall and sat on the bench in contemplation and made this into some sort of shrine."

"Which members of your household would appreciate this room the most?"

Dan could easily picture his cats lounging regally upon the windowsill, either napping or surveying the world beyond. "Maat and Nisaba."

Kyle grinned and pulled open a sliding wood pocket-door at one end of the room, to reveal a cat flap at the bottom. He gestured towards a similar door at the other end.

"They built this room for their *cats*? Are you serious?"

"Amazing, isn't it? I think they had several cats. I have pictures from before. The wall had cat towers at each end with a walkway connecting them,

scratching posts, cat caves, water and food bowls on the floor, and two covered litter boxes.”

“A perfect cat retreat.” Dan shook his head in amazement. “And yet, being cats, they probably ignored this room whenever their people most wanted privacy, determined to be underfoot, or on laps, or participating in every project.”

When Dan walked into the house to find Rafael and Adrianna fighting, he almost walked out again. If alcohol weren't banned in the house, he would be seriously tempted to grab a beer and watch the fireworks. Or maybe dump it on both their heads. They only came over to have dinner with Mom and Dad and Tara once every two or three weeks. Surely they could wait to fight until they were in their own home. *Or maybe they want to fight here so they have an audience.*

“I can't believe you bought a motorcycle!” Adrianna yelled at Rafael

“I didn't buy it! I just told Rene I was interested in trying it out.”

“You don't even know how to drive one! If you crash, who is going to take care of the kids?”

“For the last time, I didn't buy it.”

“But you were planning to, I could tell. Without thinking about how you would pay for it. And you know we don't have money for that.”

“Stop yelling or you'll wake Cori.”

Right on cue, Corinna started whimpering, and the whimpers quickly changed into a wail. Adrianna snatched her out of the carrier and glared at Rafael, muttering a couple of her mother's favorite Spanish epithets.

Both his brother and sister-in-law spotted him at the same time. They stared at him expectantly, as if waiting for him to intervene or take a side. Silently, Dan shrugged and left them to it. Three-year-old Tomas sat in his booster seat at the kitchen table, eating macaroni and cheese and baked carrots under Mom's watchful gaze. Rebel lounged nearby, apparently nonchalant, but watching for food to fall to the floor. He had gobbled up a lot of the boy's food over the past few months, despite Dan's protests about some of it being bad for dogs. Rebel was not as finicky as Tomas. He was perfectly happy to swallow anything potentially edible and occasionally vomit it back up if it wasn't.

Dan took Rebel into the den. He tossed an old blanket over the couch, sat down, and let Rebel jump up with him. Slowly stroking his dog, Dan leaned his head back and closed his eyes. Maybe if he fell asleep, no one would wake him for dinner.

No such luck. Only Corinna, drooling in her carrier, and Tomas, sitting in a child bean-bag chair and watching *Cars* on Tara's laptop, received a reprieve from listening to adult conversation. Tara described in detail all the upcoming exams and term papers she still faced. Adrianna tried to outdo Tara with stories about clients from hell, which normally were amusing, but came out whiny instead, since she was still mad at Rafael, and her mood was not particularly cheerful. Rafael seemed worried because one of his band members was moving away—the guy trying to sell his motorcycle. Mom got stressed because Rafael was unhappy. *She never seems to care or notice if I am.* Dad remained silent, although he did smile politely, if absently, at one of Adrianna's stories.

At first Dan absorbed it all, trying to determine if any of the complaints people had involved a problem he would be expected to solve. Then he tuned it out by trying to decide what to do with Rebel tomorrow morning. He had started going to sleep half an hour earlier and getting up fifteen minutes earlier. He found that if he shortened their walk by five minutes, afterwards he could sneak in ten minutes of training on just a single apparatus. And give a few more minutes of attention to the cats, so they didn't feel left out.

He lost track of the conversation until he heard Mom say, "Dan can do them for you."

"Do what?" he asked, abruptly aware he should have been paying more attention.

"Their taxes."

A married couple with two kids, irregular childcare, one student who played in small bands for irregular pay, much of which he probably didn't keep track of, and a hairdresser who probably made some of her money from tips and likely had undocumented business expenses. Oh joy. And who knew what receipts they kept from medical expenses, or whether they had bothered to buy tax software when it was on sale.

"No." Five pairs of eyes stared at him in astonishment. They look stunned, like people swept off their feet when the carpet they stood on suddenly decided to yank itself out from under them.

“I will do it *with* you both. Not *for* you. I am not this family’s slave. I will *help* you figure out what information you need and where it goes, and you will *both* sit there the entire time. Adrianna, you will enter the information as I go through the program with you and show you what is needed. If either of you leaves, I stop. And Tomas and Cori need to stay with someone else while we are working on the taxes. No distractions. Adrianna, I know you can manage a budget, you are perfectly capable of learning how to do this.”

Adrianna recovered enough to give him a tentative smile. The rest of the family still sat in shock. *Maybe Tara’s right. I don’t tell them “no” enough.* Dan stood, picking up his dishes. “And it will have to be on Saturday. I have other plans for Sunday afternoon. I’ll email you a list of papers you need to get together before we start.”

“What are you doing on Sunday?” asked Rafael, sounding surprised.

“Classes with Rebel, obedience training and such. Dad suggested Rebel needed more training.” *That much is the truth.* “And I know this may astonish some of you, but I do actually have a life away from this house.” *I think Kyle has taught me disobedience. Better leave before I say something I regret.*

He smiled as he headed towards the kitchen. “Call me so we can set up a time. Bye Mom, Dad. See you tomorrow.” He put his dishes in the dishwasher, called for Rebel, and made his escape.

Chapter Seven

A-Frame

Dan looked at himself in the mirror, hardly recognizing himself. And smiled. He had actually gone shopping Thursday evening, splurging on new clothing not intended for work. Black boots, tight charcoal jeans, and an unbuttoned burnt-gold-and-black short-sleeve shirt over a form-fitting maroon tee. In a moment of daring, he had applied one of the temporary tattoos Kyle had given him. He pushed up the left shirtsleeve just enough to admire the mystic knot, clearly displayed between his T-shirt sleeve and his elbow. Even if no one else could see it unless he showed it to them, he knew it was there.

A careful application of styling gel allowed him to produce carelessly spikey hair, wonderfully different from his usual conservative look. After a brief hesitation, he added a gold chain necklace. Then he pulled on his new ultra-soft, black suede jacket. Hot weather would be here soon enough that he wanted to wear it while he had the chance.

A few weeks ago, Dan had looked in the mirror and thought a part of himself missing. He was not sure where the lost part had gone, but whatever he had found was so much better. He felt enthusiastic, excited. Okay, maybe a little apprehensive, too, but... happy.

My first night going out in public with a group of gay men. My first night "out"? My first "outing"? Dan hoped it was only nerves, and his mind would stop with the lame puns.

He jumped when the doorbell rang. He put on some music for the animals—classical combined with sounds of nature—and went to the door. Time to stop regretting the years he had missed, and focus instead on what he had now. Time to reach out and reclaim his life. And what better and more normal way than a Saturday night dinner with friends? *And maybe my first real date with Kyle?*

Kyle wore black slacks, his leather jacket, and a shirt spanning the spectrum between ice blue and royal blue. No earrings today, but he did have a tattoo of a blue-and-purple dragon flying across his left hand.

The men stared at each other. *Do we really have to go out? Maybe we should just stay in.* Kyle looked as if he agreed with Dan's thoughts, but pulled himself together enough to speak first. "Love the hair and clothes. You look... hot. Did you shop all day?"

At that, Dan laughed. "Wish I could have." He stepped outside before lust overtook what few brain cells he had left. "Spent all afternoon helping my brother and sister-in-law finish their taxes."

"Cutting it kind of close, aren't they?" Kyle asked, as he started the car.

"Yeah. I am at least satisfied they won't raise any Audit-Me-Now red flags. Otherwise I would have made them file an extension. Fortunately for me, Adrianna has been keeping records for both of them. Unfortunately for me, her cousin did their taxes for them last year, but she is deployed right now."

"Too bad."

"Yeah. Which is why I got stuck with them. But she did impress on Adrianna what to keep at least. It wasn't the total nightmare I expect anytime my brother and money come together. At least, as long as no one ever tries to track down if and how much his band got paid in cash on various nights at forgotten venues. I would tell Rafael he owes me a few beers and dinner, but he is too busy sulking that I made him watch part of the time."

"How cruel and heartless of you."

"Apparently so. I was going to make him sit there the entire time, but then thought Adrianna and I didn't deserve that. She made him do some other chores he has been putting off *and* promise to help with cleaning my parents' garage. And she gave me a quart of her homemade *carnitas*, which I may even share with you on Wednesday."

Dan and Kyle joined Jacob and Leo and two other guys for pizza at a restaurant on Fourth Avenue. Dan had met the other men only briefly at the party last month. Tony, a former IT classmate of Jacob's, worked for one of the city utilities. He had compensated for an early tendency to baldness by shaving his head and growing a goatee. He looked as if he could give professional wrestlers or bouncers a run for their money. Tex, a short, slender, eternally youthful type—who would probably get carded into his thirties—projected an air of wide-eyed innocence and spoke with a deliberate country drawl. Dan was immediately taken with the flamboyant and energetic pediatric nurse, with his purple-streaked platinum hair and irrepressible sense of humor.

"So how did you end up working with Jacob?" Tony asked Dan, after they all placed their drink orders.

“When I was in college, my parents were hit by a drunk driver. In between my junior and senior years. Dad was badly hurt and Mom couldn't cope, so I had to spend a lot of time dealing with the lawyers. Thomas Emrich, a golfing buddy of Dad's, offered to help my parents, both with the civil claim against the drunken imbecile's insurance company and representing their interests as victims in the criminal case. I spent a lot of time talking to him that year, especially while we were waiting for court hearings. He told me he was impressed at how I handled everything, juggling classes and family, even graduating on time with almost unimpaired grades. When his law firm had a job opening in the finance department, he invited me to apply.”

“Accounting?” Tex looked interested. “I tried to take an accounting course once. Maybe because I had a youthful crush on the instructor. Even he wasn't worth staying in the class for, alas.”

Everyone laughed, and Dan added, “I like my job, for now, but in a few years I might want to get my MBA. I can do that online.”

After the salads arrived, Jacob prodded Dan. “Tell them the story about you, Roz, and the kittens.”

“Who is Roz?” asked Kyle.

“April Roselle,” replied Jacob. “Mr. Mendoza's assistant. She has been called Roz for years, but after the movie *Monsters Inc.* came out, apparently she started wearing glasses as similar to the character Roz from the movie as she could find. On purpose. And when she says your last name—*Mr. Riley, why is the Internet not working? Again?*—you tremble in fear.”

Dan eyed his friend skeptically. He had never seen Jacob show fear of Roz or anyone else. Although Dan had once been afraid, well nervous, of Roz, so maybe Jacob had once felt the same way. He continued his story.

“The first day I arrived, my supervisor told me to avoid her if I didn't like animals. I shrugged it off, and had completely forgotten the warning when I was summoned upstairs two weeks after I had started.”

“Fresh blood.” Jacob shook his head knowingly. “She always assesses any new employees, then strikes once she knows their weakness.”

“I was scared when I approached Mr. Mendoza's office. I wasn't sure if I had done something wrong. She frowned at me until I was worried I had spilled coffee on my shirt or something. Then she told me to go into the small conference room. I had visions of getting axed.”

Dan paused for dramatic effect and stabbed a tomato with his fork.

“I opened the conference room door... and heard something I never expected.”

He took a slow drink of his beer, then added, “Meowing.”

Dan felt himself almost glowing as people laughed right on cue.

“Instead of a firing squad, I faced a collapsible playpen full of kittens.” It had seemed as out of place in the staid lawyer’s office as a polar bear in the tropics. “My relief was over too soon, because Roz—who is a tiny lady who appears deceptively harmless—began grilling me about my life, where I lived, how I felt about my furniture, and what I knew about cats. I think she had been taking lessons in interrogating people from the lawyers.”

“Or it comes naturally,” Jacob offered.

Dan looked at him. “Dare you to say that to her. Anyhow, she invited me to take a look. I knew I shouldn’t, but I couldn’t resist. Brought down by tiny balls of fluff. Five minutes later, and I was in love. Just as I was attempting to extricate my trousers from a soft furball with claws, Mr. Mendoza peeked into the conference room. For a couple of seconds, I was terrified he would be angry, but he just smiled indulgently, and said, ‘Another victim, April? Don’t fight it, Zanetti. And take two. They can keep each other company.’”

Dan laughed ruefully, remembering the outcome of his first meeting with Roz. Before him, she had already managed, through persuasion and guile and an uncanny knack of matching animals with people, to place fifty or more animals just with the employees of the firm, or their friends and family. No one who could benefit from an animal companion remained petless for long.

“So how many did you end up with?” Tony asked.

Dan pulled out his phone, showed them a picture. “Meet Maat and Nisaba. Maat was the Egyptian goddess of law and justice. Nisaba was the Sumerian goddess of accounting, math, and grain. Seemed appropriate for an accountant in a law firm.” *They brought laughter and joy back into my life.* “How was I to know that creatures that cute and cuddly were actually little minions of destruction?”

“Cool names!” Tex gasped, after he managed to stop laughing. “But keep Tony away from this Roz person. He has no willpower when it comes to cats. I can’t trust him in a pet store on adoption days.”

Tony blushed.

“How many cats do you two have?”

“Five.” Tony pulled out his own phone and showed them a picture of Tex, dressed in purple scrubs, asleep on a couch, being used as a bed by five felines. Then more pictures of a sunroom that seemed to be devoted solely to the needs of the cats—as much if not more so than the unused cat room at Kyle’s—with two cat towers with caves, cat walks along the walls, cat perches on a window ledge, a cat self-grooming station, and an array of cat toys on the floor. “All rescue cats.” He pretended to glare at his partner. “And Tex loves them, no matter how much he pretends otherwise.”

The pizza arrived and conversation turned to a discussion of food, best pizza places in the city, best and worst local breweries, hot—and not—actors, pro-gay and anti-gay legislation, and whether the new streetcar running from the university through downtown would be operational on time and actually make any money. Tony and Tex described their recent trip through Jerome in north-central Arizona. The historic mining town, built vertically on a steep hillside, was now a historic landmark and tourist attraction, with tours and museums and galleries and even a couple of decent wineries.

After the best evening Dan could remember having in months, even including the party at Jacob and Leo’s, the three couples split the bill and parted company. Dan and Kyle decided to go for a stroll. They left their jackets in the car, as the night was still mild, and wandered north to University Boulevard before turning east towards the university.

In a slightly darkened area between businesses, Dan took the opportunity to show Kyle the mystic knot tattoo.

Kyle leaned close and whispered, “I like it. Looks perfect on you. I just hope that some time when you want one for a while, you let me help you put it on. And take it off.”

Dan’s mouth went dry. He couldn’t speak for fear of either stammering or squeaking or something else as undignified, so he settled for a quick nod.

Kyle’s right hand traced lightly around the tattoo, then slid down Dan’s left arm. Kyle’s fingers tentatively ran along Dan’s palm. Dan’s hand tingled and he convulsively clutched Kyle’s hand, then loosened his grip. For a moment he stared into Kyle’s eyes, then turned and continued down the street, heading into the stretch of University Boulevard populated by students—bars, restaurants,

stores. Holding hands. He had never, would never have, dared to hold a boy's hand when he was a college student frequenting some of the same establishments they now strolled towards.

Now here he was with a *professor*. He stopped. "What if we run into one of your students? Or other faculty?"

Kyle shrugged, continuing. "Not a problem. I am not blatant about my orientation, but it isn't a secret, either. I refuse to live in the closet."

You must not have had Catholic parents.

Kyle sensed his withdrawal and squeezed his hand. "Hey, it'll be okay."

They walked along the south side of University, pausing momentarily to debate whether they had any room left for ice cream, but concurring they had eaten too much pizza. Then they walked back along the north side. No one stared at them. No one gave them dirty glares, or knowing looks, or paid them any attention at all.

Back at Kyle's car, Dan took stock of his emotions. "I am not sure whether to feel relieved that nothing happened or annoyed that it was no big deal."

"Hey, it was a big deal for you." Kyle seemed to understand what Dan was feeling. "Normally I might suggest we go for a coffee or something, but I think we should be responsible pet owners and get home to our dogs."

Dan agreed, although he did not want the evening to end.

All too soon, Dan and Kyle stood outside Dan's door.

"We never had dessert," Kyle murmured.

"I didn't want anything sweet."

"Really? Are you sure?" And then Kyle kissed him.

What began as tentative and sweet soon gave way to urgency and heat. Hands clutched, roamed, groped as their bodies pressed together. Closer. He needed to get closer. Dan melted into Kyle. Any space between them was too much.

Rebel's greeting, sounding clearly through the door, trickled like ice water over their mutual passion. Slowly, reluctantly, they peeled apart, mouths separating, hands still lingering on each other.

Kyle swallowed hard. "Going to be fucking hard to drive. See you tomorrow afternoon." He rested his forehead against Dan's, gave him a bone-squishing hug, then turned away. He looked back only briefly as he got in his car. Dan stood frozen to the spot until Kyle finally drove away and his taillights disappeared.

Dan entered the house, seriously regretting being a responsible adult. He loved his pets, but sometimes they got in the way of... well, actually, normally they didn't. What had just happened? He'd had sex before, mostly no-strings encounters. Maybe he didn't have a ton of experience, but he wasn't a virgin. But he had never brought a man into his home, probably because he'd never had a boyfriend and was locked in his self-imposed closet. And when had Kyle become his boyfriend? Tonight? Weeks ago, even if tonight was the first time they had acted on their attraction? All Dan knew was that he could not remember ever feeling this hot, this needy, this desperate, even when he was a teenager with more hormones than brain cells.

He let Rebel out back and stood in the kitchen, splashing cold water on his face.

He needed to think. He had opened the closet door tonight. Stuck his head out and looked around. Maybe it was time to get all the way out, and damn the consequences.

After dinner the next night, Dan and Kyle sat together on one of the couches, much closer than they had on previous Sundays. Kyle draped his arm over Dan, as Dan leaned against him.

"Before we go any further I want to, that is, I need to, uh, come out to my family. I meant to years ago, but I never got up the courage to do it, I guess." Dan touched Kyle's free hand. "I let things drift, made excuses about family first, but I think I was just afraid. But I don't want to hide any more. You... we... us... means too much. Did that even make sense?"

"You will feel better being out, because you want a relationship based on honesty?"

"Exactly!"

Kyle reached out a hand, ran his fingers lightly through Dan's hair. "I would never have demanded it of you, but I admit I'm glad this is your choice. Mainly because I want you to be happy, and I am not sure if you will be otherwise. But

I hope coming out doesn't come between you and your family, or mess up your relationship with them."

"What happened when you came out to your family? You never talk about them."

Kyle's hand stilled, then resumed its light caress. "No. I'm sorry that I haven't. It's time though. I'll tell you all about me, about my family, before you talk to yours. All about the tattoos, too. Not tonight, though. Wednesday."

"Wednesday."

Neither of them moved for a long time.

Chapter Eight

Pause Table

Kyle had offered to bring Thai takeout, his version of comfort food. None of their animals would try to steal it, an added advantage. Dan agreed. He knew, without the words being spoken, that at least part of Kyle's story was not going to be pleasant. Whatever the man needed to get through it, Dan would provide if he could.

They did not add anything new to training that night, just running Rebel through the obstacles he already knew. As Kyle paced around Dan's backyard, he pondered aloud whether using scent to lure Rebel up and over the dogwalk and A-frame for the first time would work. Then he said they could add the dogwalk into the mix next week, although they would need to build a modified one, but shorter and lower would be a good thing for a beginner anyhow. Dan didn't remind him they had already had at least part of this discussion the previous Wednesday.

Kyle finally stopped pacing when Kiko whined. Kyle stared at her, then looked at Dan where he sat scratching Rebel's head. "Am I rambling?"

"A little. It's okay. Let's feed the cats. Then do you want to eat first, or talk?"

Kyle thought for a moment. "Maybe I'll get through the hard part, then we can eat."

After the animals had been fed, everyone crowded into Dan's little den, Kyle and Dan on the couch, the dogs at their feet. Even Maat and Nisaba came running into the room, springing nonchalantly over the dogs. Nisaba settled in Dan's lap, while Maat curled up in Kyle's. Dan wondered if the animals sensed something was up. Kyle pushed aside the iPad he carried to make room for the cat. With one hand clutching the tablet and the other petting Maat, Kyle began.

"I was born to conservative Southern parents and baptized James Kyle Williams, but always called Jimmy. My parents were God-fearing and gay-hating. I was raised in a small town among other people just like them. And many of them were quite small-minded. I think I was twelve when I realized I was gay, and, like you, I tried to hide it. Unlike you, I was a little more daring and was caught kissing another boy my sophomore year."

Kyle paused, and his voiced roughened. "My dad beat me. Badly. No broken bones, but a black eye, split lip, and plenty of bruises on my ribs and back. I heard my parents talking about where to send me to 'cure' me. So I grabbed my backpack, some clothes, the little money I had, and ran. Out through my window and down a tree."

"Did you have a plan?"

"To find my grandparents and uncle somewhere in Chicago. Unfortunately for me, the address book was in the kitchen with my parents, and I didn't dare go in there to take a look. I had no clue how large a big city was. Or how difficult my search would be."

Kyle stared at Maat, but Dan had the impression he didn't see her, only his memories.

"I was still a toddler when my grandparents and uncle moved to Chicago, which my father viewed as a den of liberals and sinners. They had visited us when I was younger, but health problems had kept them away, and they couldn't visit after I was eleven or so. I hadn't seen them in at least four years. They had invited me to visit them in Illinois over vacations. My parents always said no. Still, I knew they *wanted* to see me. So when I ran, my first thought was to go to them. I knew better than to even think about approaching anyone on my dad's side."

Kyle fumbled for his iPad, careful not to dislodge Maat, and scrolled to his pictures folder, showing Dan a few pictures of his grandparents taken over the span of a decade or so. One picture showed the older couple and the man portrayed on Kyle's shoulder tattoo standing together in front of a colorful mural.

"I spent the night in my best friend's barn and caught his attention when he came out to do chores the next morning. Mason snuck me food, a blanket, a little more money, and told me my parents were looking for me. His older brother caught us, sent Mason off to school. I was so scared Grady was going to beat me up, too, since he always spouted anti-gay crap in public. Instead he looked at my face and sighed. He patched me up, gave me something to rub on the bruises, which was good because I hurt really badly by then. Even gave me some concealer for the black eye, saying he had borrowed it from their sister, although I'm pretty sure she never knew.

"Grady brought me a better pack, more food, an old sweater, a couple of good water bottles, and gave me a lift to the bus depot forty miles away. He

even paid for my ticket to Chicago and gave me fifty bucks. I offered to pay him back when I could, but he told me not to look back. He told me: 'Pay it forward when you can. Move on with your life. Get out of here while you still can.' Then he wished me luck and watched me board the bus." Kyle took a couple of deep breaths, and continued, "That was the last time I saw my hometown."

"Did you ever see Mason or Grady again?"

"I made contact with Grady once on Facebook, years later, not to add as a friend, just to thank him, tell him that I had done as he asked. Grady replied that Mason had been injured in Afghanistan, but was recovering, and was married with two kids. And Grady wrote that he had moved away, also. I saw by his Facebook profile that he had left the farm, moved to Atlanta."

Dan connected the dots. "He was gay?"

Kyle shrugged. "Perhaps. Or he knew people that were. He never said, merely implied. As far as I know, he never married. We aren't friends, really, not even on Facebook. I will probably never see either of them again. But I told Grady to let me know if I could ever do him or Mason a favor." Kyle tapped the small Eye of Horus tattoo on his upper left bicep. "This one is for Grady. My protector, however briefly. I think without him, my escape might not ever have happened, certainly not been as smooth at the start."

He traced the swirls of blue and green down his arm, to where they circled a raven. "A raven can mean so many things. A dark omen. A symbol of death, perhaps the end of the old life. A symbol of travel, as the Norse god Odin may have used ravens to travel the world and tell him what they saw. In some Native American lore, crows and ravens are helpers and guides of mankind, in some ravens are tricksters, and in some they are tied closely to creation myths."

Dan knew that some of the southwestern tribes viewed the raven as the bringer of light and sun. "And for you?"

"A little of everything. The beginning of the end of Jimmy Williams. The journey to a new life. A way out of the impending darkness." Kyle shivered, lowered his right hand to his lap.

"At about ten the next night, after a couple of bus changes and a long wait at one of the depots, I arrived at the Chicago Greyhound station. I found a pay phone, but it didn't have a phone book. I tried information, but without an address they couldn't help me. Apparently there were too many possible matches. I didn't know what to do. Should I ask a guard for help? Would they

ask who I was and send me home? I had been so focused on getting to Chicago and remaining unnoticed on the trip, I hadn't thought through what I would do when I got there."

"Understandable."

"Well, certainly typical of an impulsive teenager, I guess. As I was standing there panicking, an older girl approached me, asked if she could help. Karla helped me find a phone book, but I had no luck finding a listing for either my uncle or my grandparents. Karla said she didn't think the phone book covered the entire Chicago area. I was astonished, because it was the fattest phone book I had ever seen. A security guard or cop headed in our direction, and Karla grabbed my arm and hauled me out of there. She said she had a place to stay with a bunch of other teens, and I could crash with them for the night and look for my relatives in the morning."

"You just went off with a stranger?"

"I know in retrospect it was a brainless move, that I could easily have been picked up by a gang or traffickers or something. But I was fifteen, alone, afraid, and probably country-boy naive. Fortunately her offer was legitimate, in its own way. As we took a long, cold walk, she volunteered the information that she had run away from home because her mother's boyfriend had fondled her and kept trying to rape her. Her mother didn't believe her when she told. Some of the other kids were CPS runaways. She never asked why I had run away.

"Karla finally led me down a dark alley in a part of town that was probably only moderately sleazy, but scared me witless at the time. The house was abandoned or damaged, and had been boarded up. She showed me how to get in through a low basement window and onto a couple of crates. About a dozen kids were living there, ranging from twelve to seventeen, I imagine. At night, they kept warm with a fire in the fireplace, but during the day they couldn't light it for fear someone would see the smoke.

"Karla found me an empty spot of floor in the main room. All the kids stayed there, because the fireplace provided the only heat there was. My spot was near an outer wall, but I had a blanket and a couple of layers, and at that point was grateful just for a place to lie down. I had not been prepared for how much colder Chicago in November would be. I used my backpack as a pillow to keep what little I had safe. At least I had been smart enough to have already distributed my money between my different pockets and my shoes and other hiding places.

“In the morning, the kids surreptitiously removed a couple of the alley-side boards to let in some light. I am not sure whether the water had never been turned off or a more enterprising member of the squatters had turned it back on, but the cold water in the bathroom and the kitchen both worked. However, the bathroom was scarier than almost anything else I had seen.” Kyle shuddered. “Teenage boys are not the most fastidious people, but that was gross by any standard.

“When we left, we snuck out of the house alone or in pairs, never too many at once. By daylight, I could see the house had once been a pale blue, although time and lack of care had turned it into a dingy bluish-gray. The kids called it Sky House. I bought a cheap breakfast for Karla and me, and she took me to the nearest public library. The Internet was down and none of their phone books had what I needed. She suggested we go to the library of the closest university for a better chance at having a good Internet connection.

“As we left the library, I heard barking and growling and yelping and whimpering. A little black-and-white dog was getting chased and bullied by bigger dogs. I scared them off. I knelt down and reached out to him. At first he cowered away, but when I fed him some stale crackers I had in my pack, he let me pet him. He was skittish and hungry, maybe injured. His fur was matted, and he had no collar. I could see his ribs. Karla said if I fed every stray in Chicago I would starve, but I reminded her I was a stray, too. I made a collar out of a bandana and a leash from a cut-up pair of socks knotted together. We found a park with a spigot where we could wash him off, even though it was cold. I got him some cheap dog food. Probably crappy, but better than the nothing he had been eating. We decided to go back to Sky House with the dog and warm up and tackle the university library the next day.”

“That’s the dog tattooed on your right arm?”

Kyle nodded. “I learned later he was a McNab collie, specially bred in California to herd cattle. From Scottish Border Collie stock. Some people must have brought them back to the Midwest to work on farms or as pets, otherwise one would not have ended up abandoned in Chicago. Do you ever wonder about fate, about a moment in time that changed everything? I sometimes wonder what would have happened if we had left the library ten minutes earlier, or ten minutes later? If we hadn’t found the dog, if we had gone to the university that day, if I had tracked down my grandparents that afternoon.”

“What did happen because you found the dog?”

“As I said, we decided to go back to Sky House. I used some of my dwindling money to buy us a little more food. Some of the kids still went to school and others were out working. And by working, I don’t mean legal jobs. I am not sure if any of them belonged to established gangs, but some of them definitely worked on the streets and others were probably shoplifters. I am not sure what Karla did for money. Most of them wandered back by early evening, and many went to sleep early. Not much else to do but sleep in a cold, dark house. Especially when most of them were underfed.

“A few had scored some low-quality drugs and used those. Two pairs of kids had sex right there with everyone else in the room at the same time. Even if it was pretty dark with only the firelight, we could all still hear. An older boy hit on me, but didn’t press after my stammered refusal. I was afraid it was only a matter of time before I became like them. I just lay there in the dark, holding the dog, and praying I could find my grandparents and uncle before it was too late.”

Kyle fell silent again. Dan pictured him, young and alone and afraid: afraid of his parents, afraid of being alone, afraid of being raped or having to sell himself for money, afraid of getting hooked on drugs and losing his hope.

“I woke to screaming and barking. To chaos. Something had been placed too close to the fireplace, or embers had drifted out. Not sure what caught on fire first, but one of the girls woke up with her blankets on fire. In her haste to throw them off, she spread the flames to someone else. Soon half the room seemed to be burning. Everyone was frantic to get out, but with the boarded up windows and doors, and only one small exit window in the basement, it seemed to take forever.

“The room smelled of smoke, and pieces of the floor above were falling into the basement. I was last in line, because I had the dog and my pack. A piece of something burning hit my arm, only singeing my clothes but hitting the dog. I was holding him as he struggled, trying to keep him quiet, to keep him from running back to where there was no exit. I finally managed to push the dog up through the window opening, and hands grabbed him. Then a firefighter smashed open the basement door, and I was hauled out that way.

“The other kids had all scattered, trying to get away from the authorities. I stayed put. I had no place to go, no idea where to go, and I wouldn’t leave the dog. The kids had put the fear of the police into me, in only a day, so I asked the firefighters for help. Told them I needed a vet for my dog and help finding

my family. One of the other firefighters had a wife who did social work. They notified her.

“The firefighters kept the police off me as we waited for the social worker. She took me with her, saying our first stop would be at an emergency vet clinic. When the vet asked me for the dog’s name, I said didn’t know what his old name was, but his new name was Scorch.” Kyle’s fingers traced the dog tattoos.

“An appropriate name.”

“Yeah. My brief spark of brilliance. The firefighter and the social worker were licensed for foster care. Usually they took care of younger children on an emergency short-term basis until permanent placements could be found. Even though I was older, she took me in for the night, saying it was too late to find another place, and they would help me in the morning. Well, later in the morning, because by then it was close to three a.m.

“Around noon, the police came. I told my story, explained why I couldn’t go home. They made me show them the bruises and black eye, then made me go to a doctor for a physical and photos. When I got back to the house, I was told the police had located my grandparents and uncle. They had moved away from Chicago, which was why they weren’t in the phone book at the bus station and why information hadn’t been too helpful. I don’t think my mother ever bothered to tell me they had moved, although I am sure she knew.

“My grandparents and uncle arrived shortly before dinner.” Kyle scrolled to another picture of them on his iPad. “My grandfather was Lucas Laurence Magnusson, although most people called him Laurie, my grandmother was Annette Silver Magnusson, and my uncle was Keith Lucas Magnusson, and he went by Lucas. I didn’t realize until they introduced themselves to the other adults that Laurie and Lucas both went by their middle name. I felt like a light had turned on inside me. I said I didn’t want to be Jimmy Williams anymore—well, I probably said *I don’t wanna be Jimmy Williams no more*—I wanted to be Kyle Magnusson. They said they would call me Kyle, but I might not be able to change my last name until I turned eighteen.”

Moving carefully, so as not to dislodge a sleeping Maat, Kyle pulled off his shirt. Across his chest, a phoenix rose from a bed of flames. Traces of light blue appeared behind the flames and outlining some of the feathers. “Sky House burning. I like to think of it as the night Jimmy died, and Kyle was born, or reborn. And even though I didn’t get this until I was in my early twenties, this was my first tattoo.”

“Did they hurt? The tattoos?”

“Some more than others. But I was smart and did what I was told. No alcohol, no aspirin, and so forth. Nothing was a whim. Each piece was carefully planned. But I welcomed the pain as part of my transformation, as part of my memory of events I never wanted to forget.” Kyle touched the rings in his nipples. “I think these hurt more going in than most of the tattoos.” He stomach rumbled as he pulled his shirt back on. “Dinner?”

Dan suddenly realized he was starving. They microwaved the takeout and sat down to eat. After eating in silence for a while, Kyle continued with his story.

“My grandparents were retired and lived in a nice peaceful community with plenty of other retirees. My uncle lived about ten minutes away by car and fifteen minutes by bike, twenty-five minutes on foot if I cut through a couple of neighbors' yards. So, close enough my uncle could be available if needed, far enough away they could live separate lives.”

“Didn't you tell me once your uncle was deaf?”

“Yeah, Uncle Lucas had a series of ear infections and other illnesses as a child. He got chicken pox later than most kids, caught the flu a couple of times, and had meningitis when he was about ten. The doctors aren't sure whether one of those, or a combination, led to the deafness, but his parents started noticing it when he was eleven or twelve, and he was almost completely deaf by the time he was eighteen. He never let it slow him down, though. He made enough money on the stock market and in real estate that he could indulge in his favorite activities: designing and painting enormous murals, driving fast cars, and having sex with medium-fast women.”

“Medium-fast?”

“The kind that would spend the night, but not with a minor in the house? And who didn't expect commitment? I spent every other Friday night and some Saturdays away at my grandparents. At least until I made new friends, then sometimes I had overnights with them.”

“How did you communicate if he was deaf? Must have been hard.”

“It was a little tricky at first, but we managed. Lucas could still speak fairly well—especially when he needed to yell at me—and could lip read fluently. I learned how to sign adequately and write a decent shorthand that I still use in my own note-taking.”

“Anyhow, I enrolled tentatively in the local high school shortly before Thanksgiving, while waiting for my papers to get transferred. The principal of my old school even had all my reading assignments and exams faxed to the new school so I could complete the semester. I remember not being too thrilled with that.” Kyle made a face as he recalled his teenage reaction, then sobered.

“I had meetings with a new caseworker and a child advocacy lawyer. I had to appear at a hearing and talk to a judge. My parents were present telephonically, so I did not have to see them. After a few weeks and probably a lot of legal maneuvering and posturing I wasn't aware of, Lucas was appointed my guardian until I turned eighteen.”

As they ate, Kyle told Dan about growing closer to Lucas and his grandparents, shared memories of their first Christmas together, and his struggle to adapt to a long, snowy, bitter winters. He laughed when he explained he and Lucas had often gone to foreign-language films together, because they had subtitles. Kyle and Lucas had also bonded over a shared love of Scorch.

“Lucas loved that dog as much as I did, maybe more. He was the one who suggested we go to dog agility classes with Scorch. And Scorch sensed from the beginning that Lucas couldn't hear him, always found other ways to communicate with him. A paw, a nose, a tongue.”

Kyle's love for his uncle and grandparents and Scorch came through clearly as he told stories of finishing high school, of the training they had done with Scorch and the competitions they had won. Kyle showed Dan photos of the truly stunning murals Lucas Montgomery had designed for buildings and other structures, often pictures of him standing with prominent business owners or public officials. Not just in the Chicago area, but all over the Midwest and sometimes beyond. In the summer, Kyle had often travelled with his uncle on his projects.

“On my eighteenth birthday, all four of us went down to the courthouse. I changed my name legally to Kyle Lucas Magnusson. I told my grandfather and my uncle that this way I could have a piece of both of them, and I already knew that Kyle had been Annette's father's name. So now I had something of all of them in my name. We had a totally awesome celebration lunch, although I think my grandparents were a little sad about my mother's absence from their lives. She had rarely talked to them since I moved there, and I far as I know, she never asked about me. I have no idea whether they told her about me

anyway. I was just glad I got to apply to college and graduate from high-school as Kyle Magnusson.”

Kyle talked about going to college and grad school at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the closest university to where his grandparents and uncle lived. Unlike Dan, he had wanted to live with his family for the first couple of years because of sharing Scorch with his uncle, but they all encouraged him to move out on his own if he wanted to.

“My college years were much less tame than yours. I think I absorbed my uncle’s wildness, and unlike you, I didn’t have to hide being gay. I worked hard in college, but I also partied hard and regularly went clubbing. Probably too much. Never drugs, though, not when I saw how they messed up friends and caused delays and disabilities in children born to drug users. I had all my piercings by the time I was twenty, but never more than toyed with the idea of a tattoo.”

His grandparents had lived to see him graduate from college with a degree in speech-language pathology, then died within a week of each other the following July.

“Mom came for their funeral, even though she had not bothered to visit them in the last eleven years. Or seen me for almost seven. My grandparents split almost everything between Lucas and me, though.”

Lucas took his parents’ death hard, and decided to spend some time travelling, often with his current lover and ASL translator in tow. When Kyle began his graduate work, he and Scorch took up residence in a small apartment over a tattoo shop. And although he had become good friends with the tattooist, and spent hours talking about tattoos and symbolism with the man, Kyle had actually received his first tattoos from the man’s mentor, who had made several trips down from Chicago to work on Kyle and a few other special jobs for his protégé. Even though Kyle did not say so, Dan suspected he and the younger tattooist had been lovers.

After he completed graduate school, Kyle moved closer to Chicago, doing a clinical fellowship “to get my certificate of clinical compliance—CCC—in speech language pathology” and then do some post-doctoral work.

“Meanwhile, Uncle Lucas had returned to Illinois. He had done all manner of dangerous thrill-seeking activities—racing at high speeds on closed tracks, white water rafting, skydiving and hang-gliding. He had even accidentally walked within twenty yards of a grizzly bear while hiking in the mountains and

come away unscathed. All while taking mural commissions and building up his investment portfolio. Damned overachiever.”

Tears glistened in Kyle's eyes. “He always said he would rather go out in a blaze of glory, as long as he didn't take anyone with him, than die slowly of a disease in his old age. He had been sick enough as a child.”

Kiko pawed at Kyle's leg, whining. He reached down to scratch her.

Dan reached his hand across the table. Kyle grasped it, tight.

“Lucas was finishing a mural in Indianapolis. It was almost done. He was just doing a few final touch-ups. The building face had trees on either side of it, and some bees had decided to nest in one of them. Must have been new hive migration season, or something. No one knows what he did to set them off, or if they just didn't like something about him, or he got too close. Maybe, being deaf, he didn't hear them or have any warning. They swarmed him, stinging him repeatedly. He was tethered to the scaffolding, to keep from falling, but the tether also kept him from running away. He was allergic to bees, so he went into anaphylactic shock. I hope he lost consciousness quickly. The medical examiner thinks he did. Other people who saw the attack risked both stings and falling to get him to the ground. He was dead before the paramedics got to him, probably even before the ambulance got to the scene. His epinephrine injector was found in his jacket on the ground. Even if it had been in his pocket, though, it might not have done any good. I was told he was probably dead within ten minutes and unconscious within five. But I'll never know.”

Tears trickled down Kyle's cheeks. Dan sprang up from his chair and went to Kyle, holding him close.

“I was so pissed at him for a while. Stupid, pointless death,” Kyle mumbled into Dan's shirt. Then he looked up, and surprisingly, managed a small laugh.

“But he might have been amused. His story made the newspapers in several regional cities. A coffee-table-book publisher put together a posthumous book of all his paintings and murals, along with short articles and letters from people who had known him. Many of his prominent patrons wanted to attend his funeral, one of them even volunteering his assistant to help me organize it, in a much more ostentatious fashion than I had ever planned. My only requirements were that I be allowed to talk, and that Scorch be allowed to attend. The funeral was open to the public, and I think a whole bevy of his former flings appeared. Everything was interpreted in ASL for the deaf community. People spoke about

what an inspiration he had been. I hadn't realized how much of an impact he had made, not just to me but to other people, until he was dead."

Did your mother come? Dan wondered, but he didn't ask. Instead, he tugged Kyle back to the couch. Kiko jumped up next to them and put her head on Kyle's lap, while Rebel rested his head on Dan's knee. Maat and Nisaba had climbed to an upper shelf, and watched over the proceedings from above, with occasional breaks for grooming.

"After the funeral, once Uncle Lucas was buried next to Laurie and Annette, I made plans to leave Illinois. I applied for jobs all over the west and northeast. I came out for the job interview at the U of A and was intrigued by the contrast in climate to anything I had ever known. Scorch died shortly after I accepted the job, before I had moved down. He was twelve by that point. I cremated him and kept half the ashes in a little urn and buried the other half over Lucas's grave, on the sly.

"I started getting the tattoos on my right arm before I left, although I made two trips back to finish the job and wrap up loose ends." He touched his upper arm on the outside. "My uncle Lucas." A tattoo band around his arm above the elbow. "A ring of laurel leaves for Laurie." On the inside of his upper arm. "A Celtic five-fold for Annette, since it was her favorite symbol by far, and has so many meanings. I like to use this one as a temp also." He ran his hand down to his lower arm. "Two of Scorch."

Kyle leaned against Dan, for once seeking strength and comfort instead of providing it. "As I drove here, I stopped from time to time to visit friends. I picked up Kiko from the new boyfriend of a female classmate of mine. Purebred from show dog stock by a trainer needing a few identical dogs for a movie. Kiko was the mismatched runt of the litter, and the trainer offered him to the boyfriend, who already owned several show dogs. He didn't need another, and offered to give me Kiko after he saw us together. I knew when I took her that she would never have the natural ability to be the agility dog Scorch was. But she was herself, unique. And we bonded from the moment I picked her up."

Kiko whined gently, as if in agreement, and burrowed closer into Kyle.

Chapter Nine

Teeter-Totter

At first, Dan wanted to come out immediately. Having finally made the decision, he wanted it over with as soon as possible. There were two problems with this plan. First, a Friday or Saturday would be best, so that if things went badly, he would have a couple of days to recover. After some internal wrestling, Dan decided Easter weekend was perhaps not the best time for his big revelation. Why did it have to fall in late April this year, and not in March? Second, Kyle was going to be out of town attending a friend's wedding, and he had asked Dan to wait until he got back.

Unfortunately, the delay gave Dan more time to worry and agonize and imagine worse-case scenarios. Kyle must have mentioned something to Jacob, because he soon was immersed in what he privately called "Operation Distract Dan". Kyle's nightly phone calls were not unexpected. However Dan was surprised, and usually grateful, when his other friends, and even new acquaintances, also went out of their way to keep him busy.

On Friday, Heather and Joe invited him to their usual late movie night. Natasha joined them with her current fling. After the movie was over, they went out for ice cream and coffee and dissected the bizarre plot, until they came up with scenarios and interpretations never intended by the writers or director, but which made no less sense than anything in the movie. Joe tried to determine which drugs the writers had been high on, and Heather commented that the studio execs had probably been using, too. Dan pretended to lament that beautiful scenery had been ruined by gratuitous action shots. Natasha compared the chemistry between the actors to that existing in a pile of rocks.

On Saturday—a beautiful, cool, slightly overcast day—he went to the Desert Museum with Jacob, Leo, Tony, Tex's pre-teen half-siblings, and Vince and his family. They managed to catch one of the last raptor free-flight shows of the season, watching the birds soar over the desert. Everyone admired the lizards, both the colorful iguanas and the sand-colored natives that blended into the desert landscape, the coati hiding in the trees, the birds in the walk-in aviaries, the prairie dogs and the burrowing pygmy owls, the juvenila herd, the wildcats, and the sleeping gray fox. Brightly colored butterflies abounded at the pollination gardens and hummingbirds darted everywhere. Everyone agreed

that it was a shame Tex had to work, except perhaps his brother and sister, who had wheedling Tony down to a finely honed science.

On Sunday, Dan's family joined Adrianna's much larger family at a local park for an Easter picnic of epic proportions, complete with games and prizes for the kids and way too much American and Mexican picnic food. Even Dad and Mom seemed to have a good time; Dad held Cori much of the afternoon, as Mom spoiled Tomas. Would this be the last time he was welcome in the group?

Rebel eventually got overly stimulated by the noise and the smells, and children kept offering him unhealthy foods. Dan used that as an excuse to leave early. He contemplated going over to Kyle's to train alone, since Kyle had given him a key and the alarm security code for just that reason, but instead went home. He napped with the cats, trained and walked Rebel, and fixed a light dinner. When he found himself watching one of Kyle's favorite TV shows instead of his own travel show, he knew he was in trouble. But he didn't change the channel.

On Monday and Tuesday, his friends dragged him into the employee break-room at lunch, and Jacob made Dan go to the gym with him after work. At night, Dan drew strength from talking to Kyle on the phone, mostly about mundane topics, but sometimes as the hour grew later, they were more willing to discuss a few of the darker items and fears they found it hard to talk about face-to-face.

Kyle called on Wednesday morning to say he had picked up a stomach bug, hopefully only one of those forty-eight hour things, and would not be able to come over that night. Dan offered to bring him some food. Kyle responded that he appreciated the offer, but didn't want good food to go to waste. Nonetheless, Dan went over to Kyle's after picking up Rebel, bringing most of the items on the BRAT diet list as well as some other easily digestible foods. Poor Kyle, a man who loved spicy food was going to hate this.

Dan let himself into Kyle's house. Rebel and Kiko greeted each other, friends now after all these weeks. Kyle woke long enough to blink at him sleepily, then nodded gratefully when Dan said he would walk Kiko, before curling up and closing his eyes again. Dan cast a cautious glance into the plastic-bag lined wastebasket by the bed, but it was mercifully empty.

He refilled the water bottle on Kyle's nightstand. As he was putting it back, he observed the nightstand on the other side, which he had once noticed in passing had been piled high with books and papers, was now empty except for

a lamp, a second clock, and a box of tissues. He smiled at the implication. Perhaps, soon. He hoped. He quietly slid the drawer open. The necessary supplies were all there, unopened and brand new. Excitement bubbled. Something to look forward to once he got through this last step. He needed to stock up at his house as well.

Then Dan attempted to master the art of walking both a slow have-to-sniff-everything beagle and a some-sniffing's-okay-but-let's-move-along bull terrier. About the time Kiko seemed to realize Rebel would not be hurried and started sulking, Rebel caught the scent of something interesting and lunged up the hill, with Dan and Kiko hurrying alongside. Normally Dan would have checked such behavior immediately, but he was still struggling to figure out how to best manage two leashes. Rebel was extremely displeased when Dan didn't let him follow the scent across a neighbor's property. However, farther along, the beagle found a new scent, which he and Kiko both checked out, and communed over, before adding their own marks. They both looked at Dan in unison.

“Um, no, guys. That's your thing. I don't want to get arrested.”

They returned to the house to find Kyle awake, mixing a spoonful of sports recovery electrolyte powder into a glass of sparkling water. Kyle tentatively sipped the concoction. His sweat-matted hair clung to his head.

“Why don't you take a shower while I'm here? Call me if you need anything. I'll feed Kiko.”

Kyle accepted the offer with as much energy and gratitude as he seemed capable of mustering. He managed the shower on his own, somewhat to Dan's regret, emerging shakily a few minutes later to sip at his drink again. He still looked unnaturally pale. He looked through the items Dan had placed on the counter, picking up the carton of “all-natural free-range low-sodium chicken broth” with an appreciative smile.

“I know you care when you don't want to assault my system with artificial junk. Although maybe I could use a preservative or antibiotic or two.”

After Kyle consumed half a cup of microwaved broth, which seemed to be staying put inside him, Dan helped him back to his bed, propping him up with pillows. Kiko came and jumped up beside Kyle, ignoring her designated bed on the floor. Rebel wandered restlessly around the room. The men chatted quietly for a little while, until Kyle was on the verge of sleep, then Dan kissed him gently, collected Rebel, and returned to his own home.

On Thursday, Kyle called Dan around ten to say he was heading in to try to give a lecture and pick up papers he needed to read. If Dan never heard from

him again, he could assume the worst. Shortly before three, Kyle reported he was home safely and capable of walking Kiko. Dan stopped at a drugstore on his way to pick up Rebel. He and Kyle talked on the phone that night, as Dan lay on the couch with Rebel and Maat snuggling against him, while Nisaba perched on the couch arm, purring. Kyle told Dan to call the next night, whether or not he came out to his family, no matter what time it was.

Friday was almost here. Tomorrow. Only a day away. Finally. Oh, God, already? Dan felt he had been waiting forever, yet he dreaded each minute slipping by as much as he welcomed them.

Dan choked down his breakfast, nerves making him so queasy he wondered for a moment if he had caught Kyle's stomach bug. He told his mother when he dropped off Rebel that he needed to talk with her and Dad tonight about something important. Safely seated in his office, he did his work on autopilot, continuing straight through lunch, and left an hour earlier than usual. He went home, showered, and changed clothes.

Then he played with the cats. Nisaba preferred chase games, so he pulled out her favorite feather toy for a while. Even Maat played, although in a more half-hearted fashion. Maat preferred toys that made noise when batted across the floor. Because of her habit of playing with them at two in the morning, Dan tried to remember to put them in a drawer before he went to bed. Now he picked up her favorite bell-in-ball, jingling it, watching her eyes follow as he moved it back and forth. He tossed it across the room. *Sproing!* The game was on.

After the romp was over, he brushed and cuddled both cats, cursing himself for not doing those before he changed. A lint roller got rid of most of the fur. He left them with dinner and fresh water and a variety of their safe toys.

When Dan entered through his parents' back gate, he saw Tara seated at a table in the back yard, chatting on her cell. *Thought she was having a sleepover with Eden.* He had hoped to catch his parents alone. Well, maybe she just hadn't left yet and would be gone by the time he came back from walking Rebel. Even if she stayed, he could still find time and space for some privacy with his folks.

As he walked Rebel, he practiced various versions of his speech, boring his poor dog, who had heard it too many times already. If only he knew the best way to begin. *I have something important to discuss if you have a moment... I*

need to tell you something... I know this will come as a surprise... He would have to wing it. Dan felt he finally understood the idiom about butterflies in the stomach. He had not even been this nervous before his CPA exam. He sent a text to Kyle. "Wish me luck. Call u soon."

Upon his return, Dan was dismayed to find Adrianna's car now in the driveway as well.

"Thought your band had a gig tonight," he said to Rafael, as he unclipped Rebel's leash.

"We traded days with another group. We still haven't found a drummer to replace Rene. Mom invited us over, is that a problem?"

Yes, because I told Mom this morning I wanted to talk to her and Dad. I wanted to tell them first. And didn't particularly want to tell you yet. And definitely did not want Adrianna's whole family to know, which they will as soon as she does. "Of course not," he lied. *Guess I will have to wait until after dinner.*

At least Tomas and Cori weren't there. *Why couldn't they have taken advantage of a baby sitter to go on an actual date? Maybe because they would have to pay for dinner. Okay, that's mean. Or maybe Mom told them to come, after I talked to her. Great, now I am being paranoid. She probably just didn't get that it was important. Chill. Deep breath.*

Dinner dragged on. Dan picked at his food. With the butterflies holding a circus carnival in his stomach, or maybe building a roller coaster, he wasn't entirely sure how much of his dinner he was going to be able to keep down anyhow.

Finally the conversation turned from Tara's high school graduation and Rafael's recital, both scheduled for next month, although not the same day.

Dad focused on Dan. "When are you going to clean out the garage? We want to be able to put a second car in there."

Why? Mom hardly ever drives the one you have. Only Tara uses it. Or are you going to let Tara get her own car now that she's heading to college? In which case, she can lend a hand. "Depends on when Rafael is free to help." Dan glanced over at his brother. "Maybe next Saturday?"

"Sorry, bro, we got plans to try out a drummer."

All day? "The following Saturday then."

“I got a thing for school in the morning, and Adrianna’s cousin is having an afternoon thing.”

“Then I guess we will just wait until mid-May, or even June after all your classes are over. Going to be a furnace in the garage by then, so we will have to start early.” Dan looked at his Dad. “Sorry, you might need to wait a while longer.”

“Dan,” Mom interjected, admonishing. “You need to do it. Rafi is still in school. And he has the children to look after.”

And finally Dan cracked, jumping to his feet. “So what? When I was his age, I was in school full-time, and taking care of you and Dad and dealing with the lawyers and the doctors and driving Tara to school every fucking—sorry Tara—day. And did I complain? No. I did what I had to. And where was Rafael? Always too busy to be bothered. For *four years*. Four years in which I ran errands and did all the home maintenance and all the yard work. So what if he has kids and school? I have a job and pets. And you know what? I want to have time for a life, too.”

He turned away, not even wanting to look at them. Ran both hands through his hair and pulled it. Wondered vaguely if everything ought to be tinted in a red haze, because he certainly felt the way he always imagined *seeing red* felt like, but if anything, the world was just out of focus and hazy. He turned back.

“I did what you asked, did their taxes on the last weekend before they were due, and Rafael *promised* to help with this *one* thing, cleaning the garage. And why shouldn’t he help, when half the crap in there is his, anyhow? I’m giving you fair warning right now, Rafael. If you blow this off and leave me to do it alone, I am throwing every single *thing* of yours onto the curb for the first person who comes along to take. Assuming anyone even wants it.”

For a few seconds, only his harsh breaths sounded in the room as he struggled for air.

Then Mom gasped “Danilo!” in an appalled and hurt tone, while Tara grinned and flashed him a thumbs-up sign. Rafael was red, either with anger or embarrassment. Dan found he didn’t care which—he was done protecting Rafael from the world. Rafael could grow the fuck up and face reality and responsibility like the rest of them. Aunt Nicci was right, he did coddle them.

Dan couldn’t read all the emotions on Dad’s face, but anger gave way to acceptance, and his voice was surprisingly quiet when he ordered, “Sit down, Dan.”

He sat, resisting the urge to either bury his face in his hands or apologize. He wouldn't mean the apology, anyhow. He picked up his water and drained the glass. Maybe that would drown the butterflies. As he refilled it from the pitcher, his hand trembled.

"Are you all right, Dan?" Adrianna asked gently. "And my husband *will* help clean the garage." She glared at Rafael. "Two weeks from tomorrow."

Dan sighed, managed a weak smile for Adrianna. Despite the tendency she and her family had to gossip about everything, he liked her. Especially for putting up with Rafael.

"All I wanted to do tonight was have a word *in private* with Mom and Dad this evening. I was not expecting the whole family to be here. I thought Tara was going to be at Eden's and didn't expect you and Rafael to be here either."

Tara gasped. "Mom told me after school I couldn't go to Eden's until tomorrow morning."

The butterflies had found some scuba gear. Dan glanced at his mother, who looked guilty.

"Well, I thought if you needed to discuss something important the whole family should be here," she defended.

"Without asking me?" Dan pinched the bridge of his nose. "Fine. Whatever. You know what, I don't care anymore. I'll tell everyone and get it over with. Why drag this out or ease into it? If you don't care about privacy or family secrets, why should I?" *Even if it is my secret. If I'm going to be out, why not be as out as possible? Then there will be no going back. Not that I want to.*

Mom began to look alarmed. "Dan? If you would rather not..."

"I'm gay."

Everyone looked at him, then at each other. His siblings shrugged.

Tara was the first one to speak. "Right. We know that. And?"

"And what? Wait... you *know*? All of you? *You all know*? Since when?" They all knew? Knew the secret he had been keeping for ten years? Knew the secret he had tried to protect at such cost to himself, to his college relationships, to his happiness? *They knew?*

Dan had prepared himself for a variety of reactions—denial, disbelief, anger, grudging acceptance. He had doubted they would kick him out, but he had even been prepared for that. After all, men, women, and teens got booted

from their families all the time when their orientation came to light, although usually not as brutally as Kyle had been.

They knew. They knew. They all knew. Dan couldn't shake the thought from his head. *They knew.* He was dimly aware of people speaking, talking to him, but none of their words registered in his head. Instead, he remembered the face of the first boy who had kissed him, the one who had wanted him to go out for a cheap dinner and a date at the campus movie theater. Dan had made up an excuse—the first in a long series of excuses used over the years—and the boy had never asked him out again. Then he thought back to a night in a sleazy dive he never wanted to remember, a place he would prefer to forget, a place he never would have gone to if he had been open, out... *not their fault. But they knew.* A string of meaningless encounters. Good men, interesting men, men he liked, all turned away. Long nights with only the cats for company. And later, Rebel. But still alone. *Can't believe they knew.*

Rafael looked alarmed, his parents both spoke, Tara's earlier grin had vanished, and Adrianna reached out a hand towards him.

Dan stood up, knocking over his chair, and stumbled back.

"And none of you said anything? *Why? Why didn't you say you knew?*" His voice cracked and rose unsteadily.

"Why didn't you tell us?" Dad countered with the first words Dan had understood in... how long? A few seconds? Several minutes? An eternity.

Dan felt cold, lost, untethered. *Why didn't I tell you? Because I didn't think you wanted to know. Because I was an even bigger idiot than Sergio or Rafael?* The butterflies had finally died. Or else he was too numb to feel them. All the long, lonely years. Unnecessary. Time lost, chances gone forever. *Should have come out years ago. They knew. They all knew.*

He opened his mouth to speak, but no sounds emerged. No words came to mind. Perhaps he should be feeling relieved that his family knew and didn't seem to care, but he just felt... shocked. Betrayed. Stunned. He must be the biggest idiot and worst actor on the planet. *They knew.*

He closed his mouth, and turned away. He didn't want to say anything he might regret later and wasn't certain if he could speak, anyhow. Time to leave. Past time. For now at least. He needed to think and couldn't do it when everyone was staring at him like he had suddenly sprouted wings or started speaking gibberish. Or maybe he had.

He tracked down Rebel in the kitchen and managed, “Rebel, come!” in a voice he hardly recognized as his own. He led Rebel outside before fumbling with the travel harness and leash. Only when Rebel whined and licked his face did Dan realize he had started crying.

Chapter Ten

Collapsed Tunnel

Dan wasn't sure how he managed to drive to Kyle's. But he found himself parked in the driveway, staring at the garage. Not his own carport, not his parents' garage. Kyle's. Behind him, Rebel whimpered.

"Kay, boy, we're getting out." Dan forced himself to move. He hurt all over and he hadn't even been aware of doing anything. Maybe he ached just from holding everything in. Or the hours of tension. Had he overreacted? Possibly.

He walked gingerly up the path. The house seemed dark, no lights visible from the street side of the house, except for the low walkway lights and the light above the door. Odd. Maybe Kyle had gone out? He would check his phone for messages once he was inside. He unlocked the door, but heard no beep from the alarm. A quick glance at the box showed the system was off.

Silence greeted them. The living room appeared empty, so Dan checked the study and the master bedroom and the kitchen. All empty. Maybe Kyle was outside. Outside would be good. He could sit out on the patio and look up at the sky. With the sliver of the waning moon not due to rise for hours, he could gaze at the stars and strive for inner peace. Rebel stopped walking beside him, moving towards the east windows instead of the patio door. Dan followed, rounded the end of the daybed, and stopped short as he nearly tripped over the slipcover.

The dim light of one of the decorative lanterns on the deck wall shone through the window, illuminating Kyle sleeping on his back on the daybed, a rose-and-ivy sheet pulled up to mid-chest. Even in his distressed state, a tiny portion of Dan's brain thought perhaps he should remember to tease Kyle about the pattern. His right arm was curled around Kiko, who rested her head and right paw over the phoenix tattoo. Even in sleep, Kyle's right hand loosely clutched his smart phone. *Still waiting for me to call*, Dan realized. Kyle hadn't shaved recently, and the rough shadow along his chin reminded Dan of the bad-boy impression he had first had of Kyle, all those weeks ago.

And then Dan noticed the new tattoos. Just temps, but the sight of them caused the whole world to shift again. Kyle's left hand, resting atop the sheet against his side, sported a Celtic trinity heart knot tattoo beautifully colored

along a changing rainbow spectrum. A small rose climbed up his thumb, and on his four fingers were two stars, a heart, a paw print, and a butterfly. The two stars—for the two of them? Heart for emotion, love, maybe courage and strength. A paw print for their animals. And a butterfly, a powerful symbol of transformation, or metamorphosis.

With the application of those tattoos, Kyle had demonstrated more faith in Dan than he had felt in himself. Up until the time he had blurted the words out, he had doubted his ability to say them to his family, no matter how much he had wanted to. Kyle had believed in him. And now it was done. Dan had done it for himself, but Kyle had helped him find the courage. Or maybe his love for Kyle had helped him find the courage. He stared at the butterfly, transfixed. Was that what dinner had been about, his transformation? Breaking free of his cocoon?

Thinking back over the past weeks and months, he realized that first Jacob and later Kyle, with help from their other friends, had helped him over a series of hurdles and obstacles, with the same patience and encouragement the men showed their dogs on the agility course. Jacob had probably been trying longer, albeit more subtly, to help Dan, but it was not until Kyle came into his life that Dan had felt the motivation to stand up for himself, instead of feeling increasingly resentful and frustrated. Friendship had started him on the path, but love had changed everything. And he did love Kyle, or at least he thought he did. Was it too soon to know for sure?

Dan sank to his knees on the tile by the daybed even as Rebel whined inquiringly. Kiko opened her eyes and stirred under Kyle's arm, dislodging the phone. Kyle sat up, startled, blinking awake, and fumbling for the phone until he noticed Dan. Concern and alarm flashed across his face, and he sat up, shifting Kiko with him.

"Dan, are you okay? Did they hurt you?" he asked, even as he reached out.

"Not the way you mean. Not physically." Dan felt the tears return as the tumultuous emotions came flooding back. "Kyle, they *knew*. All of them, Dad, Mom, Rafael, Tara... hell, even *Adrianna* knew." He rested his face against Kyle's sheet-covered knees, trying to stem his tears.

"They already knew you were gay?"

Dan nodded.

"Come up here." Kyle reached down and pulled Dan up to sit next to him on the daybed, wrapping both arms around him.

Dan leaned into Kyle's bare shoulder, mumbling "All those years, thinking I was hiding the truth, that I needed to hide the truth, practically lying. And hating myself for it, for the hiding and being such a coward. I don't think I realized until tonight how much I hated the hiding, when I realized it hadn't even been necessary."

For a long while, Kyle simply held him, saying nothing. Kiko jumped off the daybed and went over to Rebel. The dogs trotted into the kitchen. Kyle ran a soothing hand up and down Dan's back. Dan's hand crept up to rest on the phoenix.

"I know it was hard on you, keeping silent. You are not a deceitful person. And that's a compliment."

"Maybe that's why they all guessed."

After more quiet reassurances, which registered more to Dan as sound and feeling than actual words, Kyle finally offered tentatively, "At least you know now they won't kick you out of the family for being gay. One less thing to worry about."

"I know. And I should be relieved and happy. I know I should. Maybe I am. But I'm also angry and frustrated and resentful. Confused." Then the whole story spilled from Dan, somewhat disjointedly and out of order.

"So, let me summarize: this morning you told your mom you wanted to talk to her and your Dad; when you arrived you found out she intentionally invited your sister, your brother, and his wife; when your parents started demanding you clean the garage and your mom wanted to let your brother off the hook, you lost your temper, and are still mad at them for expecting you do it and mad at yourself for putting yourself in a position where your compliance is expected; and finally, when you came out after weeks or months or even years agonizing over the decision, you find out they all knew and hadn't acknowledged it to you, as a result of which, you didn't lead the life you wished you had."

The matter-of-fact recital both astonished Dan and served to help calm the chaotic swirl of his emotions. "How did you do that?"

"Years of listening to academic presentations." Kyle tugged the sheet free, and draped it so it covered both of them. "And, of course, hearing and knowing you, the real you."

As I know you. And want to know you better. Only as warmth seeped into him did Dan realize he had been shivering. "I don't want to feel this way about

them, so fucked-up. Kyle, I have *never* felt this way before. I don't *want* to feel this way, but I do. I'm such a mess."

"No, you're not. You just had your emotions locked down for a long time, and now you've let them escape the cage. We all do that from time to time. Lucas did it, I did it. You needed that shield to protect yourself, but today you let it go."

Can I have it back? Even as he asked himself the question, Dan knew he didn't want it again. At least not yet. He closed his eyes, concentrating on matching his breathing to Kyle's. Deep and steady.

"Do you know how long they have known?"

I asked. Did they say? "I'm not sure. I didn't hear what they said. I'll ask again. But if they knew when I was in college, then... Kyle, so many years wasted."

Kyle cradled Dan's head with his other hand, rubbing gently before moving down to massage his neck.

"You can't do anything about those first years of college, regrettably. But think just to the years since the car accident. What would have changed?"

A lot? Everything?

"You told me you spent the first year just juggling your schoolwork, your parents' medical needs, the lawyers, and your sister's school transportation, right?"

"Yes."

"A college relationship probably wouldn't have survived all that."

Dan thought back to the rotating partners and fickle attitudes and constant breakups prevalent in the college scene. Even those who remained constant throughout college often did not stick together afterwards. "Probably not," he conceded.

"And then you started work, but were still driving your sister to school, often picking her up at a friend's after work, and running all the errands for your parents? Plus you adopted the cats, moved into your own place, and spent time fixing it up?"

"Yes." *And drove Dad to his medical appointments and Mom to her rehab. I should tell Kyle about Mom. Not tonight, though.*

“So for at least the first two years, you wouldn’t have had much time to devote to dating or a relationship, right?”

“Right,” Dan admitted. Kyle had a point.

“So, at most, you have missed out on two years or so of post-college dating.”

“I don’t know if I want you bringing logic into this. And I am not only upset about the lack of boyfriends or sex. I am mostly angry because I felt so burdened down by guilt all this time. Not guilt for being gay, at least I don’t think so. I hope not. Guilt for keeping this giant secret, for feeling as if I was deceiving them. Even though I apparently wasn’t, nothing will ever change the way I felt. Almost all the time. That’s what hurts the most. They could have stopped it by speaking to me about it. *I could have stopped it by speaking to them about it. But they didn’t. And I didn’t.*” *Guess I still have some of my Catholic boy conscience, after all.*

“We all live with regrets.” Kyle’s touch and tone encouraged Dan to sit up and look him in the face. “Whatever we did wrong or failed to do. We learn from our mistakes if we can, and then move on. You and your family both made mistakes, but you still love them?”

“Yeah. Although right now I kind of hate them, too.”

“Understandable. But when the time is right, not tonight, maybe not tomorrow, but soon, you will all patch things up and move on.”

“Someday.” *I guess I don’t truly want to be estranged from them for long.* “It’s funny, I was so afraid of them kicking me out, and instead, I kicked myself out. Well, I stormed off. Not the behavior they expect from me.”

“Then maybe it was overdue.” Kyle stood up then, pulling Dan with him, holding him tight, and said softly, “Just consider. If you had been out, you probably would already have had a boyfriend that night we met at Jacob and Leo’s.”

No! Dan clutched Kyle tighter at the thought of never having met him, or not having been free to get to know him, because at that moment, he couldn’t imagine being with anyone else. “So maybe it was like Rebel and me, or you and Scorch, or you and Kiko. Finding each other at just the right time?” Coincidence? Or fate? His thoughts and emotions finally stopped their chaotic freefall, and settled.

And suddenly he became aware of the bare skin of Kyle’s back beneath his hands, realized the other man was wearing only loose cotton shorts. He could

feel Kyle's nipple rings pressing against his own chest. Dan pulled back a few inches, and Kyle loosened his hold a little.

Dan reached a hand out to touch Kyle's beard-rough jaw. "You took time to put on more than half a dozen tattoos, but you forgot to shave?"

"I was planning on it. I only meant to nap for a short while, and I thought I would have time after you called." Kyle gave Dan a final light hug and released him. "Why don't we both go get washed up?"

Dan retreated to the hall bathroom, washing his face, getting rid of all the evidence of tears. Then he brushed his teeth with the toothbrush Kyle had given him several weeks ago.

Back in the living room, he retrieved Kyle's phone from the daybed and placed it on a table, then straightened the sheets and placed the slipcover back on. He passed into the kitchen, poured himself a glass of water, and let the anxious dogs outside.

Kyle joined him on the patio, and they settled together onto the rocking bench. Kyle had shaved, but hadn't bothered to put on anything else, other than a pair of sandals. Dan tried to pick out some of the constellations, but Kyle's presence distracted him. He closed his eyes and leaned back. Together they rocked gently, peacefully, as the dogs finished their rounds of the backyard, then came up, seeking reassurance and love and good scratching.

Back in the house, Kyle settled the dogs as Dan rinsed out his glass and placed it in the strainer.

Then their eyes met, electricity zinging between them.

Dan took a step towards Kyle, hesitant, although he had been snuggled up against the man just minutes before. "So, I am definitely out now."

Kyle smiled slowly. "You are."

"Have I completed the obstacle course?"

Kyle pretended to contemplate as he looked Dan over. "Definitely. Maybe you stumbled a couple of times, but you got through it."

"Have I earned my reward then?" Dan closed the distance between them. "I promise to do my best to touch all the correct spots in the next event."

Kyle laughed. And kissed him. With purpose. Finally. And Dan felt himself shake loose of his internal holds. At last. He felt no guilt, nothing secret, nothing furtive. Only joy in the moment. Like a dog free of its leash or a

butterfly free of its cocoon. Free to jump and run or free to spread his new wings and fly.

They stumbled down the hall, still kissing, as Kyle pulled Dan's shirt free. Skin to skin. Much better. Then they entered the bedroom and closed the door, leaving the dogs on the other side.

Dan woke with a smile on his face. In the light of morning, he felt a bit of regret for the way the scene with his family had ended, but after that... *best night ever*. He snuggled down, reluctant to admit he was awake, trying to recapture sleep. But morning light and the sound of birds through the open window recalled him to a sense of duty. He opened his eyes, blinking at the clock. *Almost eight?* Maybe Nisaba and Maat were even now dreaming up Internet entries about his cruelty in being so late with breakfast. And the dogs probably needed to go out, although he thought he vaguely recalled Kyle letting them out earlier.

Kyle still slept beside him, and Dan took the opportunity to admire the tattoos and piercings again. Especially the piercings. Dan had loved playing with the nipple rings. Kyle had pulled off his eternity earrings before they fell asleep, but he still wore the little sapphire stud in his nose, instead of the almost invisible clear retainer he wore during the work week.

Rolling out of bed, Dan made his way to the bathroom. By the time he took a quick shower and dressed in yesterday's clothes, Kyle was awake and stretching. Dan slid easily into his arms and they held each other close, as touch rekindled memories of the night before. The good part of the night.

"I have to go feed the cats."

Kyle processed the information, thinking. "I can go with you, then we can grab some breakfast on the way back. Leave the dogs here. Or we can take the dogs with us and eat breakfast at your place. Just give me a few minutes to get cleaned up."

They spent the day together. After feeding the cats, eating their own breakfast, and playing with the cats, Kyle applied a rainbow trinity heart temp tattoo to Dan's left bicep to match the one on his own hand. Then they took the dogs for a long walk on one of the desert trails and ate a late lunch at Kyle's. Kyle graded papers while Dan watched a movie, they fixed dinner together, and decided to stay the night at Dan's to see how the cats and dogs got along. Maat and Nisaba, even though they rarely slept with Dan, objected strongly to being

shut out of the bedroom, particularly Maat, who ignored the presence of the dogs in order to wail plaintively outside the door for a long time, occasionally scratching at the wood, to see whether the men would relent. They managed to ignore her.

Sunday morning, back at Kyle's, they set up the full array of agility equipment, and Dan watched as Kyle ran Kiko through different configurations. She seemed happy to be able to show off her moves. Then they lowered the heights of the equipment and Dan led Rebel through shorter combinations of three or four obstacles. Rebel seemed comfortable with both tunnels, the dogwalk, the pause table, and even the lowest setting of the A-frame. After lunch, when everyone had rested, they started training Rebel to jump, with the bar at its lowest setting, inches lower than he would be expected to jump in competition.

Mid-afternoon, two of Kyle's frequent dog sitters stopped by. Benjamin and Lana were siblings, in their sophomore and junior years respectively. Together with a third student, they took turns stopping by Kyle's at set times during the week to play with Kiko. In exchange, Kyle provided them a quiet place to study in one of the guest bedrooms or on the patio or deck, free use of his Internet, and periodic gift certificates to the online retailer or local restaurant of their choosing. Dan introduced Rebel to them, and he explained some of the breed-specific traits of beagles.

Dan spent Sunday night with Kyle and felt a pang in his heart as he left Rebel behind the next morning. He stopped at his own home to tend to his cats, giving them extra attention, and then got ready for work. He arrived early, and the first thing he did was access the online site where he could tap into Kyle's security cameras with the IP addresses and password Kyle had given him. They were off, which meant Kyle was still at home, because he only activated the live feed when he left the property and turned on the alarm system. Dan resisted the urge to call him and ask after Rebel.

He had just started to work on closing out client accounts from recently completed cases when his office phone rang. He answered it absently, without checking the caller ID. If he had seen who was calling, he might have let it go to voice mail.

"Dan! Why haven't you been answering your cell phone? We've been trying to get in touch with you."

"Hi, Dad. I must've forgotten to turn it on." Dan winced at the apologetic tone in his voice.

“All weekend?”

Had other things on my mind. “I guess so.” *And I am glad that I did. Wasn't ready to talk to you. Still may not be. I know I need to let it go, though. So talk and make up.*

“We thought maybe you were ill. You didn't bring Rebel by this morning. And you seemed... upset on Friday.”

Upset? Yeah, just a little. “I left Rebel with a friend today. Wasn't sure if you were still willing to take care of him.” *Wasn't sure if I was ready to see you.*

His father sighed. “Dan, we've been taking care of Rebel almost as long as you've had him. Just because you're having a tantrum or sulking is no reason to upset his routine.”

Sulking? Evidently he was not over being hurt or mad. “Dad, how long have you and Mom known? And please be honest.”

“Dan, we have never lied to you.”

“But you haven't always been honest, either.”

“And you have?”

“Dad, please, just answer the question. *How long have you known?* Five years? Ten?”

Only silence came from the other end of the line. Dan was about to hang up when his father finally spoke. “We began to suspect when you were in high school. We didn't know then, it was just a suspicion. You were quiet and self-sufficient and never seemed troubled. And you never did anything overt, you never said anything. You had both male and female friends, but no one seemed special to you. We were frankly glad when you didn't show any romantic interest in anyone and seemed content to focus on your schoolwork.”

“Did you hope I wasn't gay?”

“Probably at one point, yes. For your sake as much as for ours. But when you never brought any girls home in college, never looked at them the way Sergio and Rafael did, and reacted in certain ways to legislative and political news, or the treatment of gay stars, we knew.”

His fears confirmed. “Do you have any idea what it cost me to keep being gay a secret for ten years? Or even the last seven? Or at least think that I was

keeping it a secret? Can you at least use your imagination for a moment and put yourself in my shoes?"

"I can't believe you thought we didn't know."

"I didn't think you would *want* to know. Either of you. You never, *not once*, gave any indication you thought being gay was acceptable. Never spoke out when anti-gay measures were being discussed by the state legislature. If you had asked me, or even let me know without asking me that being gay was okay, I would have told you."

Another moment of silence, then, "What did you think we were going to do? Disown you?"

Yes. Maybe. Dan finally answered, "That happens far more often than you seem to realize." *But no, probably not. It would have been hard for me to take care of everyone if I had been kicked out of the family, wouldn't it? Okay, that's unfair.* "I did what I felt I needed to do at the time, but you have no idea how hard it was, how much guilt I felt keeping silent. If I had known that you knew, my life would have been a lot different. Because of that secret, I sacrificed potential friendships and made choices to do things I might not have otherwise done. And you know what? I would have liked to have had another adult to lean on these last few years for support. Not just my cats, much as I love them." *At least I had some friends here at work willing to help me when I needed it the most, even when I didn't know it.*

His dad mumbled something too low for Dan to hear.

"Look, I can't talk about this right now. I'll bring Rebel by tomorrow as long as it's not a problem. Maybe we can talk about this over the weekend. I'm sorry if you think I am ungrateful or blowing this out of proportion. I know part of this... lack of communication... is my fault. But not all of it. I was just a kid when this pattern of silence was established, a kid tired from years of family drama and conflict. You relied on me to be the good kid. So I don't want all the blame for keeping quiet."

He hung up the office phone. After staring unseeingly at the computer screen for several minutes, he fished out his cell phone and turned it on, noting several voicemail messages from his parents, one from Adrianna, and a text message from Tara. He ignored them all and tossed the phone onto his desk. *Brain in gear. Settle the accounts of satisfied clients. Focus on the job.*

His internal pep talk helped. For a while. As he ate lunch, he connected to Kyle's security feed and briefly looked at the dogs lounging together on the

daybed. Seeing Rebel and Kiko so peaceful helped settle him enough to get him through the rest of the afternoon. At one point, he relented enough to send Tara a reassuring e-mail, and got a message full of animated hug emoticons in return. Who was reassuring whom?

After work he went directly to Kyle's. A tantalizing scent teased him as soon as he entered the house, luring him back into the kitchen. Kyle stirred a spoon in a large pot, while both dogs watched him with hopeful expressions. Rebel bounded over to Dan, as Kyle put his spoon down. Rebel got hugs and a good scratch. Kyle got a hug and a slow kiss.

"Curry again?" Dan asked, tasting the spice on Kyle.

"Vegetable and lentil curry stew. I walked the dogs, but Rebel should still be up for some training. Reinforce the newest stuff, the jumps."

As Kyle finished cooking, Dan took Rebel out back, where many of the obstacles were still set up from the day before. After they were done, he helped Kyle disassemble and store the equipment. Dinner ended far too quickly, and with a few lingering kisses and much regret, Dan took Rebel and left. Even knowing he would see Kyle in only two days did nothing to ease the sudden pang he felt at their separation. Only the knowledge that Maat and Nisaba were waiting for him kept him from turning around. As his car idled at a red light, Dan touched his arm where the temp tattoo still stood as a symbol of their feelings, of the chances or whims of fate weaving their lives together.

Chapter Eleven

Weave Poles

On Tuesday morning, Dan dropped Rebel off in his parents' backyard and snuck away without seeing anyone. He didn't have time for, or feel in the mood for, another confrontation. Or even a civilized discussion. Not yet.

He and Jacob went to the gym after work, and Jacob gave an appreciative whistle at the sight of Dan's temp tattoo.

"Feeling brave today, are you?"

"Only about some things, unfortunately. Thanks for giving me the kick I needed to reboot my life." Dan paused, searching for the right analogy. "I guess my processes were stuck in a loop or something. My new program is definitely helping."

Jacob laughed at the word play effort. After Dan shared an abbreviated and edited version of the recent events, Jacob gave Dan the nonjudgmental encouragement and support he had come to expect from the other man. "That night at our party I just wanted you to relax and have some fun. Never thought of you and Kyle together until then, but I should have. You two are good for each other. If we don't count the whole telling-the-family mess, you are the happiest I have ever seen you. And I think Kyle is, too. He needed an animal person in his life."

Dan made plans to come out to his friends at work and let the word slowly spread. Although, now that he thought about it, he wouldn't be surprised if several of them had not already guessed, or at least suspected. If his family knew, then perhaps his friends did as well. He would start with Heather and Joe. Heather would know if anyone had speculated about his orientation behind his back. And she might even be honest if he asked her about it.

Wednesday dragged at work, but when Dan and Rebel arrived home, his spirits instantly lifted when he found Kyle's vehicle parked to one side of his driveway. Inside he found Kiko playing with a new chewtoy, while Kyle sat on his couch, with his feet on the second-hand coffee table, reading—or attempting to read—a thick document with the dubious help of the cats. Maat sprawled in his lap, taking up far too much space, while Nisaba sat nearby, occasionally batting a paw at Kyle's red pen.

“I see you’ve been adopted.”

“Yes, I make a fine cat bed.” Kyle stuck the pen in the document as a bookmark, and shoved it in his bag, then gently dislodged Maat, who gave him a sleepy glare before curling up in the spot where he had been sitting. Then Dan and Kyle were in each other’s arms as if they had been separated for two months rather than two days, drawing apart only when the need to breathe became imperative.

After walking the dogs, they prepared a quick meal of salad and shrimp scampi over angel hair pasta. They finished with mint gelato and coffee. Then they snuggled on the couch, only paying half-hearted attention to the television. Maat pretended to ignore Kiko, walking by her with a new I-don’t-see-you-and-you-don’t-matter air, while still keeping watchful eyes on the bull terrier. When Nisaba walked by, dragging a gym sock, Kiko grabbed one end of it, and a brief game of tug-of-war ensued. Both of the animals enjoyed it. Although it did not end well for the poor sock.

Heartened by the animal congeniality, Dan put Rebel’s bed in the hall near the bedroom door. Kyle, who had brought over one of Kiko’s oversized pet pillows and a favorite blanket, placed them nearby. Then they snuck into the bedroom, hoping the presence of the dogs might dissuade the cats from yowling outside the closed door. The ploy succeeded, at least for one night.

Thursday, Dan stopped at the grocery store on the way home and succumbed to the lure of fresh basil plants and containers of basil clippings. He washed and spun several cups of basil leaves, setting them aside as he peeled garlic cloves. He did not expect the knock on his door. Not Kyle, not tonight. Unfortunately. Too late for deliveries, and besides, he wasn’t expecting a package. Maybe a salesperson or a neighbor? He went to open the door, gently nudging the cats aside.

“Rafael?” Dan stared at his younger brother, frozen, before remembering his manners. “Let me grab the cats. Come on in.”

He got a firm grip on his sneaky cats as Rafael opened the screen and slipped into the house.

“Is something wrong?”

“Can’t I just be here for a friendly visit?”

Dan could count on one hand the number of times Rafael had been to his house, so he contented himself with walking the short distance back to the

kitchen and gesturing his brother to a seat at the dining table. "Something to drink? Beer? Water? Juice?"

"Beer's good."

Dan passed Rafael a bottle of lager and started toasting his garlic, needing to keep his hands busy.

"Did I interrupt your dinner?"

"Not yet. Making pesto. Might eat a little tonight, but I am going to freeze most of it."

Rafael toyed with his bottle. "I am going to try to just come out and say this. I don't have a problem with you being gay. You're still my brother. And there are lots of gay guys in my classes. I didn't understand at first why you ran out on Friday. Dude, you were so angry about the garage, then so pale after you, uh, came out. I was scared for you. I thought you would be glad we all knew. Adrianna explained it to me. She knows so many people, you know, from working at the salon and talking to other mothers at toddler playgroups and library time and stuff. And I also talked to some of the guys at school. So I heard stories about kids getting kicked out of their homes and stuff, even here in Tucson."

"Yeah, it happens." He thought of Kyle, of other boys and men he had known.

"The thing is, I feel bad for never seeing that you needed us to talk to you about it. You have always been, well, quiet and responsible and self-contained. Private. You never talked much about your life apart from school or work or the animals, but I always just thought you wanted to keep your, uh, friends away from Mom and Dad, not because you didn't have a life.

"I remember you taking care of me when I was a kid, teaching me to ride a bike, looking out for me when we were in the same school. You were always there to talk to me about, you know, *stuff*. Especially when I was too embarrassed to talk to Dad or Mom. Although I guess I didn't pay enough attention, or maybe Adrianna wouldn't have gotten pregnant. Not that I wish we didn't have Tomas or anything like that."

Dan thought of his nephew and smiled. "He is a blessing to you both."

"And you should be grateful for that at least. Since Adrianna and I have kids, Mom won't be nagging you for children and trying to hook you up with a woman, despite everything. And Dad gets little Zanettis."

Dan gave a reluctant laugh. "True enough. Hadn't thought of that. The thought of Mom trying to match me with a different woman at every meal is..." He shuddered. In hindsight, maybe the fact that she had never brought an eligible woman over should have been a red flag. Adrianna had tried to pair him with some of her female friends and cousins, but not, he realized, for at least two years. "Okay. Thanks for carrying on the family bloodlines."

"You're welcome." Rafael smiled, relaxing a bit. "And if you want to know how I knew, I saw how you looked at Travis when he played keyboard for us a couple of years ago. And he said he had, uh, seen you somewhere, but he wouldn't say where. Asked me if I thought you would go out with him."

"He asked. I said no. I always said no. Until recently." Dan tossed pine nuts into the skillet with the garlic. Better not to mention to Rafael that he actually had considered hooking up once or twice with Travis at their mutual hangout, but had held back because of the musician's association with his brother. He might have changed his mind, in time, but Travis had followed his dreams to California.

"Anyhow, I just never knew you were hurting. Or that you needed us to be there *for you*. You were so busy taking care of Dad and Mom and Tara after the accident, and I know I wasn't a whole lot of help. I should have been there to help you, to give you a break, to let you get out of the house. But since you were still living there, it just seemed easier to let you deal with it all."

Dan finally admitted to his brother what he had not told anyone else. "I was planning to move out."

"Move out?"

"That summer. Before the accident. I was going to go on a road trip with some friends, then come back and move out. I had saved up enough money to cover rent for most of the school year. I was on the top of the waiting list for a tiny apartment in a triplex, just for some privacy, with fallback places all lined up."

"Jeez, Dan, I'm so sorry. I never knew. Man, that must've sucked. I mean on top of everything else."

Dan looked back in time. "Don't get me wrong, I love Mom and Dad, but I wanted out of that house so fucking bad. Just out from under their roof. I know they needed to save money for you and Tara, which was why I was going to pay for the rent myself. Living there those first three years was like being a high-school student with a curfew, even though I was over eighteen. 'Why

won't you be home for dinner? Let us know when you get in. Have you done your homework?' I don't want that for Tara."

"Tara doesn't want that for Tara."

"No kidding. Want to stay for dinner? I'll tell you the story about Tara's ploy to break Mom's resistance." Dan laughed, as he realized it had been pretty hilarious, now that he was no longer in the middle. "Call Adrianna from out back, I need to run the food processor for a while."

By the time Rafael returned from phoning Adrianna and washing his hands, Dan had finished the pesto and was heating up leftover angel hair and dicing roasted red peppers and peeling the leftover shrimp.

"I should learn to cook more. You make that look so easy. Why do you have two dog beds in your hallway?"

Dan blushed. "Um... one belongs to Kiko, my boyfriend's dog. We thought if we left it there, the cats would get used to her scent faster."

Rafael smiled the mischievous, carefree smile of old, the one he had worn when he first rode a bike by himself, or narrowly missed careening into a pole while on his roller blades, or planned to surprise his music teacher with a new song he had learned on his own. "Boyfriend, huh? I am not sure if I should ask you to tell me everything or if I should ask you not to tell me anything." His brother contemplated, undecided. "Well, you can pick what you think I want to know. And if he hurts you, I will totally help you beat him up. Even if I can't play for a week because my hands are too bruised."

Dan almost spilled the wine he was pouring for himself all over the counter at that. "Thanks! A truly magnanimous offer. Seriously, I'm touched, but I hope that's not necessary."

"Hope not. I know you are the smart one, well you and Tara, but sometimes you are totally clueless about certain things."

Dan took both the compliment and the insult in stride. "Yeah, I have begun to realize that. So be a good brother and clue me in. I will tell you one detail about Kyle though—he is way hotter than Travis was."

Over dinner, he told Rafael about the trick Tara and her friends had played, and they reminisced about their childhood, family vacations, visiting their grandparents in California, happier memories of their parents, activities they had done together despite their age gap. Then they turned to more serious

topics, talking together as adults about their parents, particularly Mom's recovery and Dad's therapy.

Rafael apologized again to Dan for leaving him to bear the entire burden the past few years. "I thought—I wanted to think—that you had everything under control. You never complained or asked for help. If you had, I would have helped. Maybe not as well as you did it, but I would have tried. And maybe Adrianna or some of her family would have also."

"Some of that was my fault for not asking, then," Dan admitted. "And I knew you were young and busy, but I am asking now. I can't do this alone anymore. Especially with Tara leaving. She helped more than she should have had to also, especially running errands after school."

At that, Rafael looked guilty, but Dan shook his head. "Let's look forward. What we need to do is split the tasks and get both our parents more involved in doing things for themselves. Yes, Dad is in a wheelchair, but Mom isn't. Now that she's clean, she can drive again if she feels motivated to. And we need to get both of them out of the house more. They shouldn't be cooped up in there day after day. It's not healthy, even if Dad's working. And Mom needs a hobby or a volunteer job."

They discussed possible ways to get both their parents out of the house and more active in the world beyond. Rafael suggested Adrianna could take Mom to some of the more female-oriented gatherings of her family, some of which sounded like activities Mom might actually like, and suggested Mom or Dad could watch his kids while he did his share of the yard work and errands, which would be easier without the children in tow.

Dan sent his brother home with a grateful hug and a container of pesto, sharing a better understanding of each other than they had enjoyed in years.

When he dropped off and picked up Rebel on Friday, he even managed a brief, only slightly awkward, chat with his parents, mainly about Rebel and the weather and a white-winged dove which had been bullying the rest of the smaller birds at the feeder. He had thought his world was finally about to settle into a new pattern. Then Sergio sent him a text, asking him to Skype. And the whole pattern shifted.

Dan stood next to Kyle inside the converted barn at PAO, looking at the layout of the ring and comparing them to three versions of the course map.

Even he could tell that changing the obstacle order around would alter the difficulty and require more attention from both dog and handler.

They had brought both Rebel and Kiko this morning, both to socialize Rebel into the class environment, and to give Kiko practice on a new arrangement. The following week would bring Rebel's first chance at attempting as much of the course as he could, at a lower height setting. Rebel had behaved remarkably well today, especially given Dan's own distracted state.

Sighing, Dan put down the papers. "Do you ever feel as if you started one course, and all of a sudden, someone changed the order, and maybe even the obstacles, and didn't bother to tell you?"

"I certainly have in the past. Is this about your parents? Your brother? Or us?"

"Family. But especially Sergio." Dan reached down to pet Rebel. "Seriously, he was the last person I expected to hear from. I mean, apart from superficial conversations when he passes through, we haven't talked in years."

"So why did he call now?"

"Dad told him. About me, about the incident at dinner. Maybe other stuff, for all I know."

"And?"

"I didn't even know he and Dad were talking. Sergio says they Skype regularly. He and Dad. They fought all the time when he was growing up, but now, he talks to Dad more than anyone else in the family. Even Mom. He says he prefers to e-mail Mom because sometimes she gets too emotional if they talk, and he doesn't need the distraction when he's deployed. And he didn't say that to be mean, he was just being matter-of-fact about what was best for him and his men. Funny, I still sometimes see him as an overly emotional, high-strung, messed-up teen, younger than I am now, but he's been a soldier for ten years. He's all grown up and mature and responsible."

"That's good, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but it's weird, too. I guess I kind of wrote him off. Hell, he may have written himself off for a while. Not anymore. He told me that since he was the master of fighting with one's family, I should learn from his mistakes and not drag out patching things up too long. He admitted to me that if our parents had died in the car accident, when he was on a previous deployment, his biggest regret would have been not being on speaking terms with them."

Dan paused, thinking back to the conversation, remembering the sight of a somber Sergio in his uniform. His older brother, at least, had claimed to have been surprised by Dan's revelation, although he, too, expressed no problems with having a gay brother.

"It was actually kind of surreal. He said he knew how I felt about the family not telling me things, because he didn't learn about the accident until weeks later. And then no one bothered to tell him about Mom's problems until after the fact, so he was furious with both Dad and me about that. And he was right, I should have told him, should have tried to contact him, or mentioned it when he was in town. Something. Not assumed he wouldn't care."

He wiggled his foot on the floor until his sole squeaked. "He congratulated me on having the guts to finally stand up for myself, though. Said he was glad to know I could do it. When I said I wasn't certain if I even knew all the reasons why I got emotional and angry, he said, '*Welcome to my teenage years*'."

Kyle choked as he held down a laugh. "I think I might like this missing brother of yours."

"I don't know when Sergio became smart, but he nailed all of us. '*I like to confront my problems head-on and can handle a good fight. Rafael is like Mom, and will ignore a problem, hoping it goes away, or will leave to avoid confrontation. Dad and Tara are manipulators. And you, Dan, you are a peacemaker and will do whatever seems best at any moment to smooth things over, and you are so determined to be good and helpful and take care of people, you don't realize when they are walking all over you.*' And I think he's probably right."

Kyle looked at the pair in the ring, as he took Dan's hand and squeezed it lightly. "So what are you going to do about it?"

Dan turned and looked at Kyle, smiling but serious. "I think I need to learn how to fight with you sometimes." His smile grew at Kyle's startled look. "Not that I think you will try to walk over me, just so that I know I can stand up for myself. We need to kick good, passive Dan to the curb."

"You are going to work to bring forth the rebellious Dan?"

"Yeah. Except maybe at work. Besides, if we do fight, then we can make up, right?"

“I certainly would hope so.” Kyle kissed him lightly. “I look forward to it. And consider me warned. Do you want to fight now, or do you want to watch Kiko and me in the ring?”

Dan pretended to consider.

“I know you and your brother are cleaning your parents’ garage next weekend,” Kyle commented after lunch. “Want to get some practice in and help me finish straightening mine?”

“Sure. Why? Are you getting another car?” Dan teased. Kyle already had two vehicles: his everyday crossover SUV and the classic sports car bequeathed to him by his uncle. The latter vehicle was safely protected under a car cover even inside the garage. Kyle told Dan he only used it on special occasions, as a date car, but they could take it for a drive or use it when they went to eat at a good restaurant. Somewhere he felt safe parking it.

After rearranging the motley piles of miscellaneous items in the unused bay on a newly assembled shelving unit along the far wall and setting some stuff aside to get donated or tossed, plenty of room was available to park a third vehicle. One pile of wood they unearthed proved to be the remnants of the old cat towers and walkways that had once been in the cat room. Kyle looked it over. “Not sure why I didn’t toss it when we pulled it out. Fate? I am not sure how much of it is reusable, but you can use it to get measurements if you want to replicate it, or design something similar.”

As Dan’s heart raced at the implication that he and the cats would one day be part of Kyle’s household, even without the invitation being formally issued, Kyle pressed a keychain garage door remote into his hand.

Dan thanked him, hugging him tight, before adding, “Of course I’m not sure my piece of junk is worthy of being in a garage.”

“Well, you won’t be driving it forever. Since I don’t think it will last that long.”

Chapter Twelve

Finish

Monday after work, Dan sat down with his parents—in the living room, not at the dining room table where their last dramatic encounter had taken place. It occurred to Dan that he had not eaten there since that night, nor spent more than five minutes at a time under his parents' roof. And for the first time in years, he had gone more than a week without running any errands for them. *Sorry, Tara. Hope I didn't make it too hard on you.*

Dan felt surprisingly ready to face whatever they said. Three nights and two days with Kyle left him happy and relaxed. Honestly, he wouldn't have been surprised to see himself glowing. Saturday, he and Kyle and the dogs had gone downtown, wandering between the different music venues of the Tucson Folk Festival. Sunday, Tex and Tony hosted an early family-friendly Cinco de Mayo potluck brunch, complete with a creative set of backyard games and table crafts for the kids. Dan still had small sparkle-glitter handprints on the legs of his shorts, from when he had ventured too close, in an ill-advised attempt to see what the children were doing, and ended up in the middle of a spontaneous glitter hug-fest. Most of it had probably rinsed out of his hair. He hoped.

Dan settled into the couch. Each of his siblings had shocked him in one way or another recently, so Dan waited to see if his parents would do the same. He was going to let them speak first.

"We owe you an apology," his father began. "We talked over what happened at dinner and what you said last Friday, and thought back over the years, and you were right. We did not want you to be gay. When you were in college, we may have told ourselves that we were okay with it and that we would support you if you told us, but you were correct when you accused us of never doing anything to encourage you to tell us." Dad reached over and put his hand over Mom's. "As long as you didn't tell us, we could pretend that maybe it wasn't true, even though we knew it was. We could imagine that you had a secret girlfriend somewhere you just didn't want to talk about. And we purposely kept any discussion of gay politics away from you when you were younger, when we thought maybe you were just confused, and it just got to be a habit over the years."

"I knew I was gay when I was fifteen. Maybe younger."

His mother winced.

“Is that why you wouldn’t let me move out when I was in college? So you could keep an eye on me?” That question had nagged at Dan since the previous week.

His parents looked at each other, then Mom spoke softly, “Mostly it was to save up money, we did still have Rafi and Tara to worry about. But yes, we hoped you would give us some indication, talk about your friends, and you would have more opportunity to talk if you lived at home. I don’t think we consciously thought if you lived at home you would be less likely to... have a relationship, but I can’t deny it could have played a role in our thinking.”

“Well you might not have thought it, but it worked. I didn’t dare have a boyfriend for fear you would hear about it. And it was a damned lonely way to live. I wanted what almost every kid that age wanted—a chance to be happy, to find a partner, if only for a few years.” Dan contemplated telling them that, if not for the accident, he would have moved out but wasn’t sure what purpose that admission would serve.

His father continued his apology with, “When you fought with Rafael about cleaning the garage on Friday and mentioned how much you have done the last four years, I knew you spoke the truth. And I recalled a few weeks ago when you said something about not being this family’s slave, a statement I brushed off at the time. But you truly felt that way.”

Dan looked at his work shoes, noting he needed to take care of some scuffs in the leather. “At times. I felt like I got stuck with the burden of caring for the whole family, but I felt shut out of it, too. Weeks went by where no one bothered to thank me for anything, or even say please. Just, Dan I need this, and Dan do that. And that wasn’t fair to me.”

“No, it wasn’t,” his mother agreed. “It wasn’t until Rafael and Adrianna came by and asked what they could do this week to give you a break that we realized how much you do—how much you did—for us. And apart from a few meals, we never showed our gratitude.”

“You took care of Rebel for me. I appreciated that.” Dan looked each of his parents in the eyes. “What I need to know *now* is whether or not you accept me as I am? Accept me as gay? I am finally remembering what it is to be happy. And I don’t want to lose that.”

Dad spoke first. “We refused to see—we didn’t want to see—that you were not happy before. You have changed the last couple of months, smiling when

you think no one is looking, humming. And I don't want you to lose being happy, either. So, yes, I accept you as you are. And I apologize sincerely and regret deeply that I let you believe otherwise for so long."

Mom wiped back her tears. "And I want you to be happy, too. I am sorry. Not only for ignoring your needs about being gay, but especially for those first years after the accident. If it weren't for my... weakness and addiction, then you would not have been burdened so heavily. I need to thank you for everything you did for me, for your father, for Tara. Without you, this family would have fallen apart. We depended on you, and you came through for us, but we failed you." She blew her nose. "Yes, Danilo. I accept you as you are, as my gay son. And I am proud of who you have become."

At that Dan felt tears come, too. Good tears. Healing tears. The years of hiding, of unacknowledged resentment, of bearing a heavy burden alone, were finally over. He didn't know if his parents would mean it forever, but they meant it now, at this moment. And he remembered, distantly, the night he met Kyle, Leo had told him to take a leap of faith. And he had taken several since then, some larger than others. He swiped a quick hand across his face and managed a tentative smile. And leapt over the edge of the cliff.

"Does this mean you two would be willing to meet my boyfriend?"

Kyle accompanied Dan when he went to help clean his family's garage, both to meet his family, and because the men didn't want to waste any of their limited time together. Kyle wore a thin, faded, paint-stained long-sleeve work shirt over another tee—one loose enough that the nipple rings probably wouldn't show. He didn't wear any nose jewelry today, but did sport a pair of topaz ear studs in a shade of blue almost matching his eyes. He had confessed to Dan that during college he had worn blue streaks in his hair more than once, even shown him a couple of old photos.

The garage cleaning project became a family affair. Tara moved the family car outside. Dad stationed his wheelchair near a card table set up in the vacated space. Mom brought a patio chair in, and alternated between sorting and directing the proceedings. When Rafael found an old photo of Sergio, Dan set it up on the table so that the absent member of the family could be remembered, even if not present.

They sorted through boxes of clothes, books, toys, games, school papers, and computer discs and video games for obsolete systems. Laughter and

nostalgic reminiscing accompanied the finds. They found a box of memorabilia from Mom's family that she had thought lost in the house somewhere, and she gratefully looked through it, promising to tell her offspring about the items at a later date. As a group, they discussed which toys and games could be cleaned or salvaged and which should be tossed. Some were set aside for Tomas and Cori and others for donation. Many books, either gifts or a particular favorite of one person or another, could suddenly not be parted with by their owners, even though they had sat boxed and forgotten for who knows how many years.

Kyle volunteered to take charge of the donations, splitting the toys and games between Tex's pediatric ward and a thrift store that raised money for children in shelter care. The clothes were also to be divvied up between several charities. Old videotapes of TV shows were tossed, purchased videotapes slated for the public library fundraiser.

When Dan found his old high school yearbooks, Kyle immediately took possession of them.

"Hey, no fair!" Dan protested, making a grab for them. "I don't get to see yours."

Kyle held the books away from Dan, grinning. "I have my last two somewhere. I'll share if you will."

Dan pretended to sulk, but inside he felt warmed as Kyle flipped through the yearbooks.

Rafael became enthralled with music sheets from childhood lessons and wondered how soon his son could start learning the keyboard. Tara reminded him that Adrianna had already confiscated the boy's xylophone and claimed, teasingly, that Tomas showed no signs of his father's musical talent. Much bickering ensued.

Within a few hours, everything was sorted, with separate piles for the donated items, those to stay at the house, and those to be taken by Dan or Rafael. Sergio's boxes remained neatly labeled and sealed in one corner, pending his next visit. They retired into the house to wash up, with Dan and Kyle letting the dogs outside for a romp.

Fortunately, his parents had learned about Kyle's career before he removed his work shirt, because they both seemed stunned by the tattoos, much to Dan's amusement. Mom even shot Dan a look of disbelief. He just winked and shrugged.

Over lunch—featuring homemade green chile and chicken tamales—his family interrogated Kyle.

When Mom asked about his family, Kyle responded, “My grandparents died just under ten years ago and my uncle four years ago.”

“And your parents?”

Kyle shrugged, expression hardening. “As far as I know, they’re still alive. Haven’t heard otherwise.”

“You don’t know?” She appeared stunned.

“Ma’am, you and Dr. Zanetti have accepted Dan.” Fortunately for the peace of the conversation, Kyle did not comment on how long that acceptance took. “My birth parents never accepted me after learning I was gay. The day they decided to send me away to get ‘fixed’ was the day I stopped considering them to be family.”

Kyle paused, looking around the table and meeting each person’s eyes. “Being accepted—as I was, in my entirety—by my grandparents and my uncle was the biggest blessing of my life. They were my family. I was lucky after they took me in, because I never had to hide after that.”

Dan’s parents both shot him guilty looks.

Dan reached out and took Kyle’s hand. “Now you have me.”

Kyle looked at him, smiled. “Now I have you. And Kiko and Rebel and Nisaba and Maat.”

And in front of his family, Dan leaned over and kissed Kyle.

As May crept onwards, the palo verde trees finally lost all their yellow flowers and pink blossoms appeared on the ironwood trees. Dan and Kyle settled into their relationship as spring gave way to summer. They trained the dogs, more in the mornings than the increasingly warm evenings, and went on excursions with their friends. Kyle attended Tara’s high school graduation with Dan. Dan accompanied Kyle to an end-of-semester dinner at the Foothills home of one of Kyle’s fellow faculty members; they took the sports car, convertible top down, and left the dogs at home. They went to hear Rafael play twice, once at a community college music department event, once when his band—with a new drummer—played in one of the local bars.

Maintaining two households had become an irritation, and they rejoiced the morning they emerged from Dan's bedroom to find all four animals snuggled together on Kiko's pillow. Rebel and Kiko lay side by side with their heads together. Nisaba curled up against Rebel's side, and Maat formed a gray ball on top of the two dogs, her white paws invisible against Kiko's fur.

"Do you think the cats are ready to move to my house now? *Our* house? Our *much bigger* house? I can work from home much of next week to keep an eye on the cats, and they will have the special cat room to retreat to."

Dan looked at the pet pile, as Rebel twitched a paw. Maat opened sleepy eyes and then closed them, falling back asleep with feline ease. "I don't know about the animals, but I definitely am." He leaned back into Kyle, then turned around for a heated kiss before pulling away a few inches. "Want to help me start packing?"

"Soon. Maybe in an hour or two." And Kyle tugged him back into the bedroom.

Later, sated and showered, they started packing the more easily movable items such as clothes—although many of those had already migrated to Kyle's—and books. Maat and Nisaba helped by investigating every box, while the dogs sniffed anything that reached the floor.

Looking at a travel book of Egypt, with a camel and a pyramid—what else—on the cover, Dan began to hum "You Belong to Me" and stopped abruptly.

"I never realized what a sad song that was until now," Dan said, as Kyle looked at him. "I mean, think about it. One person is off traveling, while the other is home alone. That's just wrong. I've always wanted to see the pyramids and the tropical isle sunsets and exotic markets, but never alone. Maybe that's why, even though I saved up money, I never went. I never wanted to travel by myself. Where's the fun if you can't share it with friends, or better yet, someone you love?"

Kyle reached out and took the book away, tossing it in the nearest box, and hugged Dan hard. "We will travel together. You and me. And sometimes the dogs. See all sorts of places, and not just because of agility events. Starting this summer, Memorial Day or the Fourth of July weekend, or any other time you want. But together, no matter what."

"Because we belong to each other. Because we love each other." The formerly closeted, newly rebellious, overachieving, Catholic accountant and the

tattooed and pierced professor, who had run from home as a rejected teen and later lost those who loved him best. Who would have thought?

“Always.”

And as they kissed, the dogs and cats crowded around them.

Epilogue

Reward

“C’mon, Kyle, we don’t want to be late!” *And we have to leave before the cats give me their pitiful looks.* Both were underfoot, meowing, sensing something was happening. They did not like the sight of the luggage.

“Take a deep breath and start loading the car. We have plenty of time.” Kyle unplugged his iPad and shoved tablet and charger into his carry-on next to his laptop.

Dan opened his own carryon to check on his new digital camera—an early Christmas present from Kyle—and the extra batteries, memory cards, charger, and adapter. And his Kindle and its charger. And his stiff new passport.

After loading the car, saying a quick goodbye to the animals, and promising them that their favorite pet-sitter would be by soon for an extended stay, they activated the security system and headed to the airport. Dan felt so bouncy and hyper, he hoped he would be able to sit still for the flight. Maybe the second cup of coffee had been a mistake. Less than ten hours from now, including layover and airport wait times, and they would be landing in Belize! Ten days spent between Belize City and Caye Caulker. True, they would miss Christmas with his family, but they saw them all the time. The semester break had been the best time for Kyle to plan a winter getaway.

There was so much they planned on experiencing. A mountain biking trip from San Ignacio through the forests. The Mayan ruins at Xunantunich and Caracol and Altun Ha. The Belize Zoo and several wildlife sanctuaries. Snorkling at the reef by Caye Caulkner and other locations. The Blue Hole by Lighthouse Reef. They hadn’t even left Tucson yet, and Dan was already more excited than he could ever remember being in his life, except for maybe when he and Kyle... anyhow, best not to let his thoughts wander in that direction right before a long plane ride. Instead, he thought about how much he loved his current life.

The last seven months had been a revelation, as everyone’s lives had changed for the better.

He and the cats and Rebel had settled easily into life at the new house. Rebel adapted to visits by the pet sitters and being home with Kiko and the cats

during the day. Nisaba and Maat loved the cat room, but soon staked their claim over certain other parts of the house, as well. They stayed away from the daybed as dog territory, but each had favorite spots elsewhere in the living room, particularly in the morning as the sun shone in there. Kyle lost ownership of his navy sweatshirt. Nisaba had found it folded in a corner of his office desk and adopted it as one of her special beds. She would curl up there frequently when Kyle was at his computer. Once, when Kyle tried to wash it, she sat on the spot where it had been, meowing pitifully until he returned it. Tex and Tony had brought over some of their woodworking equipment one weekend and helped Dan and Kyle design and construct two cat towers, one for the cat room and one for a corner of the living room. So now, Dan and Kyle probably had the second most-spoiled cats in the city.

The workout equipment had been moved into one of the guest rooms, and a second desk added into the office for Dan. His office needs took up much less space, at least until he started his online MBA sometime within the next year or two. Their biggest fight had been about money. Dan had offered to pay Kyle rent to help with the mortgage, but Kyle shrugged it off. Most of the money for the house had come from Kyle's inheritance from his uncle. Kyle told him he would rather Dan save his money for the MBA, for travel, and for a decent car. He would rather Dan be driving safely than anything else. So Dan contented himself with sharing the food and living expenses, at least until he got through his MBA and paid off his new car. Then maybe he would re-open the discussion.

Over the summer they had traveled—mostly short trips over long weekends. They had gone on camping and hiking trips with their friends, mostly in Arizona, but also venturing into New Mexico. They had taken Kiko to a couple of agility events, while Rebel just spectated. His turn would come. And they had spent one night in Phoenix after Kyle decided they had to go hear one of their favorite bands and not worry about making the long drive home afterwards.

Dan became bolder with his haircut and his choice of clothes, particularly during leisure hours. More comfortable with the temporary tattoos. He even toyed with the idea of eventually getting a permanent one, but he was not ready yet. Kyle bought him a small assortment of ear cuffs to wear on those occasions when he felt particularly brave. Dan even wore a plain cuff to work once or twice.

His father had received the jumpstart he needed to no longer feel sorry for himself. Dan wasn't certain if learning about what Kyle's uncle Lucas had

accomplished while deaf had been a spur, or just one factor among many. But his parents' garage now hosted a vehicle Dad could drive from his wheelchair. He was teaching part-time at the med school as an adjunct faculty member and seemed to be enjoying it. He and Kyle even shared stories and jokes about teaching and students.

Roz had performed her animal-matching miracles and somehow paired Dad with a service dog—a German shepherd / chocolate Lab mix trained to assist people in wheelchairs. Baxter accompanied Dad everywhere, even to classes. Now that Dad was following his physical therapy with renewed dedication, his upper body strength had improved. He even talked sometimes about finding investors interested in possibly setting up a wheelchair accessible golf course somewhere between Tucson and the retirement community of Green Valley.

Mom spent a few days a week with Tomas and Corinna. She also worked part-time for little pay at one of the charity stores. Both activities got her out of the house on a regular basis, and she was now driving herself around, at least during daylight hours, and running household errands again. And she helped both Roz and Tex whenever either needed volunteers for an animal rescue or pediatric fundraising event. Mom was the one who first learned of a new effort to raise money to provide a safe haven for homeless and runaway teens in Tucson and brought it to the attention of Kyle and Dan. After a quick background check of the outfit, Kyle had donated some money. The entire family was helping with the campaign, and Dan also recruited some pro bono legal work from his law firm.

Tara was happily ensconced with Aunt Nicci and attending ASU. She had bonded with Tex, of all people, and talked about going into premed in college and later becoming a pediatrician. Or maybe becoming a plant geneticist and achieving world domination through bioengineered plants. Dan wouldn't put either past her. Kyle merely asked her to make sure that her plants could defend them against an impending zombie apocalypse at the same time they eradicated world hunger and combatted climate change.

Over Labor Day weekend, Dan and Kyle hosted a potluck dinner party, their first big social event as a couple. Mom contributed several of her favorite dishes. Many of their mutual friends came, along with people from both the law firm and Kyle's department. Rafael and two of his friends brought instruments and played background music for a while before dinner, just for fun. To Dan's surprise, Thomas Emrich showed up, his family in tow, and spent quite a while chatting with Dad. And everyone seemed to genuinely admire the string of

temporary tattoos that ran up his left arm from wrist to elbow, showing the life cycle of a butterfly from egg to caterpillar, to chrysalis, to final metamorphosis as an adult. The first set of temps Dan had designed and printed by himself.

In October, both Kiko and Rebel had participated in a local agility event, open to dogs of all levels of experience. His parents, Rafael, Adrianna, and their kids had all been there to cheer on Rebel and Kiko. Rebel performed valiantly, although he hesitated over one of his jump cues and almost ran the wrong way through the tunnel. He waited until after he had run the course to start sniffing. Dan was extremely proud of him. Kiko came in third in her height group, running a clean course, but slower than some of the other competitors. And Dan finally got to turn the tables on Kyle, presenting him with a reward for a job well done: a pair of tickets for excellent seats to a concert he knew Kyle would love.

Sergio had come home for Thanksgiving. He and Kyle had immediately hit it off. Sergio, Dan, Rafael and Kyle had gone out a couple of nights, once to a microbrewery and once to engage in slightly inebriated bowling during adults-only hours. Kyle, volunteering to be the designated driver, and thus the only sober one, raked in the best scores. Sergio talked about his girlfriend, saying he hoped to ask her to marry him, soon, and would be spending Christmas with her family. All together, the three brothers had the best time together they had ever experienced.

Tara and Aunt Nicci had come down for the Thanksgiving weekend as well. Kyle had bribed Nicci with a few flavors of homemade mochi, an Asian dessert new to Dan's entire family, and homemade baklava.

"Are you taking care of Dan?" Nicci had asked.

"We take care of each other."

And Kyle got her seal of approval with those six words. "About time."

With the luggage checked and security checkpoints cleared, Dan finally relaxed enough to take a few deep breaths.

"Sorry if I've been a total basket case today," he apologized, after he purchased a bottle of water and they found seats.

Kyle just laughed. "I'd probably be disappointed if you treated this as a commonplace occurrence. I know this is your dream, that you have wanted this for a long, long time. And I am excited, too. I've just had more experience

being stuck in airports and on planes than you. But we have our e-books and audiobooks and even games to entertain us. We'll be fine."

Dan reached over and took Kyle's hand, looking him in the eyes.

"Kyle, you need to know, the trip is wonderful, but the travel is just one thing, a little piece of the big picture. You have made *all* my dreams come true."

And they held hands until it was time to board the plane.

The End

Author Bio

JC Shelby moved to Arizona over twenty years ago. Although she has written stories for family, friends, and classes since she was a child, this is her first published fictional work. She enjoys reading, writing, cooking, gardening, and hiking. Her household is currently run by two cats that may bear more than a passing resemblance to the two in this story.