



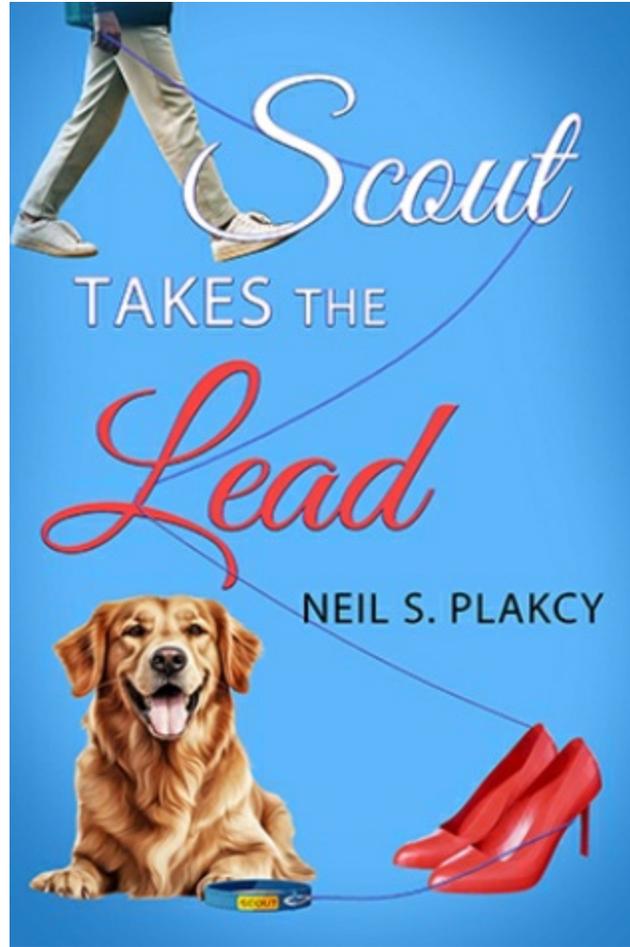
Scout

TAKES THE

Lead

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Scout Takes the Lead:

A Veteran with PTSD Dog Training Healing Romance Novella

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1: SCOUT: ALEX

Because I couldn't sleep, I walked. Up and down the night streets of Hollywood, Florida. Past palm trees with hanging fronds, darkened houses, and old-fashioned glass-fronted streetlights that glowed blue with bulbs that were supposed to be calming.

I stopped at intersections even if there wasn't any traffic, waiting for the green light, for a signal that things were going to be better. I was circling past the back side of the Publix at Young Circle when I heard a loud crash. Metallic. Like cymbals.

I hit the ground. My face pressed to the dirt. Grass blades poking up my nose. A twig jabbing my neck. My hands grabbing for my gun, a knife, any sort of weapon.

But I wasn't in the desert. That wasn't enemy fire. It had been the clatter of the cargo door on a truck, unloading stock.

That's all. Just a stupid door on a stupid truck doing a stupid daily errand.

Then, in the matter of a second, I was awake, the nightmare still lingering in the back of my mind. I was covered in sweat from my shoulders to my balls. And still the sound continued. I was safe. The war was over. For me at least.

Rolling onto my knees, I waited. Panted. Got my wits about me.

I couldn't go on like this.

"Alex Dow, you are going crazy," I said to the empty street. I had renewed my prescription for tranquilizers the day before, even though they

weren't working. I got up and stretched, my arms and legs creaking like I was sixty instead of thirty. Too much time spent in hospital beds without enough exercise.

As dawn began to spread pink fingers of light against the sky, I hurried home. I made my bed, as I did every day. One of my platoon mates once questioned a commander why bed-making was so important in the military. "It's not like the Ali Babas are going to strike harder because our bunks are a mess," he said.

"I learned something from a very wise man once," the commander said. "Life is very hard, and a sense of structure can make everything more manageable. If you start your day by making your bed, you've completed one task effectively, and that gives you the desire and motivation to continue as you started."

Who was I to question a commander? I'd only ever been a grunt. So every morning I made my bed, though sometimes my hospital corners weren't perfect.

I trudged to the bathroom where I stared at my grizzled face in the mirror. Every day I seemed older and yet less prepared for the world. I rinsed my straight razor, then began shaving the way my father had taught me, following the curves of my face. It was times like that when I could almost feel him over my shoulder, watching me, sometimes shaking his head.

I gargled with mouthwash and brushed my teeth, though I had no plans to get close enough for anyone to notice. My hair was short enough that it didn't need a comb, so I walked back into my combination bed-living room. I raised the shades and let the sunshine in, but that only pointed out how pitiful the space was.

I sat at the kitchen table with a bowl of granola. My Army buddies called it sticks and roots, but I couldn't imagine making myself a full breakfast. The effort of buying the ingredients, scrambling the eggs, and frying the bacon, was too much for me.

I took a pair of anxiety pills with a shot of orange juice. I had a whole bottle of them in the medicine cabinet. Could I just swallow them all, chase them with a bottle of whiskey, and go to sleep forever? No more nightmares, no more waking up in a cold sweat, no more flinching at every loud noise and unexpected contact.

It was the coward's way out. But I had spent so long being brave that my reservoir was empty. I had no friends, no close family, no girlfriend. Who would care if I lived or died? D'eriq, my therapist at the VA, had suggested I get a dog. That maybe a dog could keep me grounded, calming me when I got anxious, requiring me to engage with the world.

I'd read a lot about wounded vets getting service dogs, but my problems were all in my head, and I didn't want to take a dog from someone who might need one for mobility.

A brochure about service dogs sat on the coffee table. D'eriq had told me about this organization, and how they trained service dogs for vets. But they had a long wait list and required a four-week training commitment in Virginia. Could I wait that long? I doubted it.

Maybe I could train my own service dog, though.

The idea was enough to spur me to move over to my desk, where my laptop hummed in sleep mode. I pulled up a couple of websites and figured that if I got a puppy with the right characteristics, I could do the training myself. It wouldn't be as good as what the organization provided, but maybe

down the road, once I felt a little better, the dog and I could go in for some formal training.

In the meantime, at least I'd have a companion to keep me company—and keep me from taking all those pills. I showered and dressed, feeling more energized than I had in a while.

I used the app on my phone to map out a route to the Broward County Animal Shelter that avoided the interstate or any major roads likely to be too crowded, with too many aggressive drivers blowing their horns and darting around like pinballs on a track.

It took longer to get to the sprawling, low-slung building near the Fort Lauderdale airport than it might have if I'd been brave enough to take the short route, but I didn't mind. Better to be safe than crazy was my motto.

I stepped out of the car and was assailed by noise. A cacophony of barking from the building, and the sound of a jet taking off at Fort Lauderdale airport, only a few blocks away.

I looked at the back seat of my car. There was no way I could keep it clean if I got a dog. The habits of cleanliness instilled by the Army were going to war with dog hair everywhere.

But I'd come this far. I opened the glass door and the smell of all those dogs and cats assailed me. I was about to turn around but the girl behind the counter said hello.

She was barely out of her teens, with long dark hair pulled into a messy ponytail. She pulled one of her earbuds out and asked me what kind of pet I was looking for.

“A dog,” I said.

“The dog enclosures are to the left,” she said. “If you want to take one out and play, let me know.”

The first dogs I saw were either pit bulls or mixes. They were tough dogs, and if they weren't well-trained they could be violent. I needed a breed that I could take places, and pit bulls could make people jumpy if they snarled and threatened to attack. I didn't want a dog that could cause me trouble.

A family was considering what looked like a Yorkshire Terrier that yipped wildly but licked the little girl's face. The dogs around them were small and noisy, variants on chihuahuas. I'd seen women carrying little dogs in purses, and that wasn't for me. I also needed a dog who'd be quiet when I had to work.

At the end of the row of pens stood an enclosure with two puppies that looked like a mix of golden retriever and something else, probably collie, if their pointed noses were any indication. One of them was a real fireball, jumping and twirling around, while the other was quieter and came up to the wire to sniff my hand.

From what I'd seen online, either breed would be a good choice for a service dog. But which one of the two? I went back to the earbud girl and asked to see them. She brought a plastic lead and led me back to the enclosure.

“Let's try this one first,” she said, picking up the bouncy puppy by the scruff of his neck and slipping the lead around his neck. He wiggled and wriggled, trying to get free, and just looking at him made me anxious.

“Maybe the quieter one instead,” I said.

“If you want.” She put the bouncy boy down and picked up his brother, who looked right at me with soulful brown eyes that pierced something inside

me.

Right then, I knew he was going to be mine, but we walked outside and she handed the puppy to me. He licked my chin, and I kissed the top of his head. I put him down on the grass and he immediately began to sniff, tugging me forward.

“Just pull lightly on the lead to remind him who’s in control,” the girl said, and I did.

The dog immediately stopped pulling. He sniffed the ground, lifted his leg and peed. I knelt down to pet him and said, “Good dog!” He leapt up into my arms, and the deal was settled.

“I’ll take him,” I said. After I filled out the adoption application and paid the fee, the girl gave me a checklist of things I’d need, along with coupons from a pet store in Hollywood, Florida, where I lived.

“I have to let you know that this is a conditional adoption,” she said. “We require all dogs adopted here to be neutered. Because he’s not old enough for the procedure, you’ll have to have it done when he’s ready, and then we’ll finalize your paperwork.”

“I have to do that?” I had already bonded with the puppy and I didn’t like anyone telling me what I had to do with him. “What, or you come to my house and repo him?”

“It’s our policy,” she said. I frowned, but she continued. “He’s already had a full physical exam and all the necessary vaccinations. Here’s his rabies tag and the paperwork for his microchip.”

I had had enough of being under government control, and I didn’t like the idea that my dog had a chip in him. “Can you trace where he is through that?”

She shook her head. “It’s only an identification. In case he gets lost.”

Or you try to take him away from me, I thought, but I didn't say anything.

"Have you got a name for him?" she asked. I'd already thought of it while we were walking, him on point as if he was looking out for me.

"Scout," I said. He looked up at me, as if he already recognized his name.



2: TROUBLE: GRACE

I knew right away the guy was trouble. He was handsome, of course, but in a haunted way, like an El Greco Jesus, with dark hair and bags under his eyes. And his dog was adorable, a golden retriever-collie mix with a pointy snout that sniffed everything in the pet store like it was his first time away from his mama.

He was older than that, of course. Not the guy, but the dog. As a dog trainer, I tend to make a canine connection first, then move on to the human.

I got my first dog when I was seven, a stray my father found by the side of the road and brought home. I still remember Dad walking in the door, carrying the scrawny mutt who needed a bath and a couple of good meals. He handed him to me.

“You said you wanted a dog, Grace. Here you go.”

My father wasn't big on gifts, so this was very special. I called the dog Buddy, and the first thing my mother made me do was give him a bath in the big farmhouse sink in our garage. It was so tall and deep that I had to pull up a box to stand on.

I put Buddy in the basin and sprayed him with water, and he immediately shook all over me. That was my first experience with training a dog. I lowered the volume of the water, and massaged shampoo from my bathroom into his fur, talking to him in a low voice the whole time.

“You're a good boy, Buddy,” I said. “You're going to be so handsome when I get you clean.”

Of course he wasn't handsome at all, with three different colors of fur, one ear that bent over, and a grizzled snout, but he was everything I wanted. He was already housebroken, which meant he was someone's abandoned pet.

I empathized with him because most of the time my parents ignored the fact that my sister and I were there, especially when they fought. Meeting my best friend Becca helped. She had an Australian terrier who needed a lot of exercise. She and I used to take Piper out to the park and run with him after school, and through trial and error I began to teach him things Becca's family had ignored, like how to lie down, fetch a ball and catch a frisbee.

Once we were older and started to notice boys, things changed. Becca decided that Buddy and Piper had shaped my attitude toward the males of any species. She believed that I looked for guys and dogs who needed to be rescued.

Her key example was Garrett Lam, my most recent ex. He had a lot of issues, starting with his identity as a first-generation Chinese-American, balancing out the filial piety and obedience his parents expected with the freedom available to him here and ending with his inability to see a woman as his equal. He also had an adorable Pekingese who was jealous of any woman. Throw in a bad temper and you've got a toxic stew I sampled for way too long.

By then I had completed the education I needed to be a licensed dog trainer, so I defended myself to Becca. "Garrett was ignoring Lily and I had to teach him how to be good to her. Dating him was just a sideline."

But I knew that wasn't the whole truth.

I was shopping for training treats for the class I teach on Saturdays when I noticed that the handsome guy had a big bag of puppy chow in the wagon.

“Has he tried that food yet?” I asked, flashing a charming smile.

The guy shook his head.

"Can't waste money on food that'll make your little guy sick. Believe me, cleaning up dog vomit is not my idea of a good time." I gestured for him to follow me. "I'll show you what I do with all my new puppy buddies."

“Do you go through puppies often?” the guy asked.

"Well, as a trainer, it's kind of my thing. Working with owners and their pups until they become inseparable besties." I extended my hand. "Grace de Windt, at your service."

He looked reluctant to touch me, like someone with ADHD who's just got finished washing his hands eight times. But eventually, he took my hand. His was huge, and the size of it gave me a sense of security, like he could take care of me.

“Alex Dow,” he said. “I just got Scout from a rescue about an hour ago. Maybe you could help me out.”

Of course I know it's wrong to expect a guy to take care of me. I've been seeing a therapist off and on, and Dr. Altman agrees with Becca and says I'm dealing with my childhood issues by working with dogs. I can turn their lives around, while mine alternates between being out of control and wobbling on training wheels.

“Skip that food,” I said, pointing to one bag. “I had a client who swore that food put the shit in shih-tzu.” I blushed. I wasn't usually that crude.

Alex laughed.

“Yeah, it's funny until it's your four-thousand-dollar couch that needs to be reupholstered.”

“That won’t be a problem for me,” Alex said. “The furniture in my apartment came with the place, and none of it is worth anything.”

I nodded. Yeah, that’s what a lot of guys said.

Scout was absolutely adorable. I know, most puppies are, but he had a sort of gravitas mixed with his puppy charm. His eyes were big and brown and his nose was black, but the rest of him was a lovely golden color. His nose was long and when you looked at him straight-on his head had the shape of a lightbulb.

Alex headed to the toy aisle, and I wanted to tell him that there were more important things to focus on with a new puppy, but instead I followed. He picked up a rubber dachshund and squeaked it in front of Scout. The dog’s eyes opened wide and he lunged for it.

“Not until I pay for it, boy,” he said.

I grabbed a tennis ball off the shelf and tossed it at Alex. He grabbed it immediately, though he looked startled. “Good reflexes,” I said. “Try that with Scout.”

“Oh.” He did, and Scout tried to get the ball, but it fell to the ground. The dog scrambled after it and we both laughed. We played with a few more toys after that in a kind of three-way play date, and Alex seemed to be warming up to me, and learning how to interact with Scout at the same time. At one point I caught his eye and blushed, and he looked away.

Alex and I walked around the store together and I showed him the kind of all-natural treats to buy for Scout. “Be careful of anything made in China,” I said. “They don’t have the same safety standards we do.”

I pulled one bag off the shelf. “I know it’s goofy, but I like the ones that look like people food,” I said. “These tiny T-bone steaks are the right size for

training. When you're teaching a dog a command, you don't want to give him a huge treat that he'll chew on for a long time because he'll forget what he's learning and focus on the treat."

Scout eagerly sniffed the bag as Alex leaned past him to put the T-bone treats in his cart. "Good advice," he said. "What about one of these rawhide bones? It says on the package it can help clean his teeth."

I shook my head. "There are a lot of problems with rawhide. They can harbor bacteria, or chunks can get caught in Scout's digestive system. I suggest these sweet potato chews instead. Try this package of small ones. His jaws aren't strong enough yet for the big ones."

Alex was impressed. "You sure know a lot about dogs."

"It comes with the territory," I said. "I teach an obedience class on Saturdays here at the store."

I pulled a card out of my pocket. "You should bring Scout. I'm starting a new class this week."

He took the card, and I felt a warm tingle as his fingers touched mine. But once again, he backed away quickly.

We circled the toy aisle again, it was so cute to watch the big tough guy playing tug with the little puppy. Scout planted his paws on the floor, grasped the end of the rope in his mouth, and leaned backward. He lost his grip and fell back on his butt, but he bounced right back up again. Alex twirled the rope in front of the puppy, and he jumped for it.

That happened twice more.

"Alex, you don't have to win every time," I said, laughing. "You're training him to lose."

“Can’t have that,” he said. He stood up, and Scout leaned his body against my legs, pushing me into Alex. I lost my balance for a second, and Alex grabbed my arm. His fingers were strong but gentle against my skin.

“Thanks,” I said, blushing again.

He threw a couple of different types of rope in his cart and picked up Scout. The way the puppy snuggled against Alex’s broad chest melted my heart.

It was funny, but I thought that Alex was holding Scout between us, almost like a shield. What did he need to protect himself from? A girl in a pet shop?

I led them over to the piddle pad aisle. “You’re going to need these while you’re training him,” I said. “What do you do for a living?”

He got kind of weird and awkward then. “I got out of the service a few months ago and I haven’t decided what my next move is. All I know is that I don’t want to go into an office every day, so I found a company that uses home-based customer service representatives.”

“That’s cool,” I said. I noticed that I was waving my hands the way I do when I’m nervous around a cute guy. “I don’t want to work in an office either. I love that in addition to teaching my classes here I go around to peoples’ houses to train their dogs. It’s very flexible.”

Alex had a great smile. When he relaxed, I did too. “Yeah, my gig is flexible too. When I want to work, I initialize the software on my computer and wait for a call to be routed to me from the main call center.”

He leaned down to scratch Scout under the scruff of his neck. More evidence that he was comfortable with the dog between us. But that’s okay. I have all kinds of quirky clients.

“I work for a company who controls health care spending accounts for individuals, and most of the time I help people check account balances, submit receipts and so on,” Alex said. “If a problem is too complicated for me, I transfer the customer to the supervisors at the company itself.”

“That’s good, because it means you’ll have a lot of free time to work with Scout,” I said. “If you come to my class I’ll train you to look for signals from him, like when he needs to pee, so you can take him right out.”

By time he was ready to check out, Alex had relaxed a lot with me, and Scout picked up on the change. They looked like a good pair, and I hoped that Scout would help Alex the way Buddy had helped me.



3: URGE TO EXPLAIN: ALEX

Something about Grace calmed me. Maybe it was that we had Scout between us, so I didn't have to interact directly with her. He just lapped up her attention as if it was his due. There was a lot I could learn from him.

We walked out to the parking lot together. "Good luck, Scout," Grace said. She leaned down to ruffle his fur. "It looks like you've got a great daddy."

"Daddy?" I asked. "Last I heard dogs and humans don't share genetic material."

"Pet parent," she said, elbowing me. "We don't like to use the word owner. Your relationship with Scout is a partnership, but you're still the responsible one."

I thanked her again. "We'll see you at your training class on Saturday," I said. I looked down at my new buddy. "Right, Scout?" He woofed and Grace and I laughed.

As I drove away I realized that while I usually worried about who or what was lurking around the next aisle I hadn't felt anxious in the store. Maybe this dog thing was going to work out fine. Then Scout threw up.

Grace was right. Pet vomit was not fun.

I drove home with the smell of Scout's stomach contents all around me. Got him out of the car, put him in the fenced yard of the tiny bungalow I was renting on the outskirts of downtown Hollywood.

I had picked it because it was quiet and affordable, and there was a big discount store within walking distance. I'd learned that if I went shopping very early in the morning, when it first opened, I could avoid most human contact.

While Scout sat by the gate, watching me, I cleaned the car. Then we took a long walk, Scout stopping every few feet to pee. Every time, his snout quivered, as if he was absorbing all the information that the grass or bush had to offer. "Jesus, dog, how much urine do you have in you?" I asked.

He didn't answer, but he did seem to be done peeing. We walked back to the dim house and I fed him some kibble, which he seemed to like, and then turned on my computer to take some calls. While I worked, Scout napped beside me, his legs outstretched and his head resting against the floor. Any time I moved my chair he looked up to make sure I was still there.

After a couple of hours at the computer, I needed to get up and stretch. Scout immediately woke up and rushed to the front door, so I took him for a quick walk.

When I returned, I began my workout routine with the conditioning I'd learned in the Army—a series of ten exercises beginning with the bend and reach and ending with bent-leg body twists and pushups.

Scout was eager to figure out what I was doing, moving around me and sniffing, and I had to gently push him away. I did five reps of each, then through another dozen, in a precise pattern. The routine calmed me, and it must have done the same for Scout, because he snoozed on the carpet beside me.

I moved over to my weight bench. I was proud of the body I'd built in the Army and I wasn't going to let it go to seed. Maybe someday, when I was

ready, it would help me attract a girlfriend. For a moment, Grace's face flashed in my brain. No, I wasn't going to ask her out. Not for a long time. I needed to work on my demons before I was ready to inflict them on someone else.

It was nearly midnight by then. My usual pattern was to take a few hours of calls, watch TV or YouTube videos until dawn, and finally go to sleep. But I'd had a lot more human contact during that day, from the animal shelter to the pet store, than I'd had in a long time, and I was tired.

I managed to sleep for a couple of hours, but around four I woke up abruptly, surprised by a noise outside the house. My body was rigid, my heart pounding. Somehow that noise had entered my dreams, becoming a Taliban commando sneaking around my apartment complex looking for a place to set off a bomb that would kill or maim me and dozens of my neighbors.

That wasn't unusual. Nearly every day, I was tormented by memories of my time overseas. I couldn't shop in crowded stores, too worried about potential suicide bombers. Almost every public place bothered me.

When he knew I was awake, Scout sat on the floor beside me and licked my face, and my heart rate began to slow. It was like he was telling me that he was there, walking point like a good scout, aware of any dangers that were lurking around. The way ahead was clear, he seemed to say.

"You're a good boy, Scout." I scratched behind his ears, and he yawned, stretching out his long pink tongue.

He climbed on the bed and snuggled next to me, his back against my stomach, and I managed to get back to sleep for another hour or so.

When I woke again, Scout was sitting up on the bed staring at me through those big brown eyes. "You probably want to go out, don't you?" I asked. I

got up, used the bathroom and took my morning pills, then took Scout out for a long walk around my neighborhood.

I liked to get out in that brief time between when the night workers came home and the hubbub of ordinary folks leaving for work. Scout pulled on the lead, but each time I tugged back, said, “No pull,” and then praised him when he walked normally. It felt like we were making progress.

Time moved by more quickly now that I had Scout to put me on a regular schedule. He needed to be fed and walked and played with, and we began to bond over the next couple of days.

On Thursday morning, my coffee maker stopped working. No warning, no red lights. Just wouldn't turn on. “What am I going to do, Scout?” I asked. “I need my caffeine.”

He grabbed his lead with his jaws. “You want to go out?”

I remembered a piece of homework D'eriq had assigned me. He wanted me to go somewhere, a bar, restaurant, or coffee shop, and interact with an employee. It didn't have to be an in-depth conversation, he said. But something more than simply placing my order and saying thank you.

Java Boys was a coffee shop that I passed often on my walks. From the outside, it looked like a big, open space, with lots of room between tables so I wouldn't feel crowded. I hooked Scout's lead and said, “Homework time.”

We walked easily down the street to the coffee shop. A couple of posters in the window advertised poetry readings, game nights, and a collection of towels for baby turtles.

When I looked in the window, there was no one in line at the order station, so I left Scout outside, his lead tied to a table leg. “You be a good

boy,” I said. “I’ll be right back.” I stroked his soft fur and he sprawled onto the pavement.

I felt comfortable as soon as I walked in. One of those sixties songs my parents had listened to was playing on the stereo, and it looked like a comforting environment where I could be around other people but without any threat. The room smelled like coffee and chocolate, and the buzz of the bean grinder and the whoosh of the milk foaming made a pleasant backdrop.

A lanky black guy in his early twenties with tattoos up and down his arms was on duty by the register. The name tag on his green apron read “Akimbo.”

“Good morning, my man,” he said, with a pleasant island lilt. “What can I get for you?”

“I’ll have a coconut dark chocolate coffee, extra-large.”

“An excellent choice. Your name?”

“Alex.”

He wrote my name on a paper cup and checked a couple of boxes on it. I stuck my credit card in the chip reader and when the charge had gone through, Akimbo asked if I’d like a receipt. I said no thanks, and he told me to have a wonderful day, and that he hoped to see me again. I thanked him, proud that I’d been able to accomplish this small interaction without feeling stressed.

It wasn’t exactly what D’eriq had assigned me, but it was a start.

I looked out through the window and saw Scout sitting up and watching me, and I smiled. While the older guy behind the coffee bar made my drink for me, I looked around. Hollywood was a diverse neighborhood, and when I went on long walks I heard different accents, from Spanish to Russian to Haitian creole. There was a mix of ages and races, people who looked like

they had been sick, people with handicaps. Ordinary-looking people, including many women. For the first time I felt like I might belong in my own neighborhood.

I sat at a table outside the front window with Scout by my side and sipped my coffee. On our way home, we were waiting at the traffic light by the shopping center when a beefy guy in a Miami Hurricanes ball cap, camouflage T-shirt and loose nylon shorts stepped up right beside me. He had one of those rubber bracelets for a cause and what looked like a metal charm bracelet on his right wrist.

I don't like to stand too close to other people, and when someone tries to crowd my space I back away. He moved with me, though.

"Nice guns, dude," he said in a low voice. "You work out?"

I hated it when guys called biceps "guns." To me, guns were weapons used to kill people. The guy reached over to squeeze my left bicep and I reacted instinctively, karate chopping his arm down and then twisting it behind his back.

"Ow! Crap! Let me go, you nut job!"

My body was pulsing with adrenaline, and Scout barked sharply. I looked down at the dog and then up at the guy, and I let the guy go.

"What the hell is your problem?" He didn't wait for an answer, though—he darted across the street and a guy in a convertible with the top down blasted his horn.

"Sorry!" I called after him. I felt this urge to explain, but he was long gone.



4: BASIC TRAINING: GRACE

My favorite workshop day is the first one, when I get to see who my new clients are. Not just the canine ones, though of course they're my favorites. But the human ones, too. Young couples with their first puppy, a set of training wheels for having an infant. They were cute because they were still figuring out who was going to be the disciplinarian in their relationship. Who would fall for the puppy's sad eyes, and who would enforce the rules.

There were always a couple of families with a kid's first puppy. Five years old was often cited as the magic number to get a child a dog, though in my opinion it was more about the behavior of the adults than the age of the kid. Who was going to be the primary dog trainer? Was that person the real dog lover, and was he or she home often enough?

I've run into a lot of men who adored their dogs, but left most of the training and the cleaning up to their wives, which led to strife. Usually the kid was in the middle of those battles. It was important to know which parent was going to train the child, too.

There are a lot of ways you can make dog ownership a terrible chore, like forcing walks and cleanup on a kid who wants no part of it. Ideally, the dog-loving parent was the one who worked with the kid, passing on that canine love and making chores into expressions of affection. A kid who's not squeamish can get a lot of delight out of picking up poop or combing tangles out of a dog's hair. And seeing the love a dog expresses for a child can warm even the coldest heart.

Then there are the singletons. Young women who get big dogs, often for safety reasons, without understanding how strong the animals can be. Guys who think a small dog will be low-maintenance when it's exactly the opposite.

I was surprised to see Alex and Scout that Saturday morning. Though he had promised to show up, he looked like the kind of guy who was so self-reliant he thought he could train a dog himself, without understanding any of the basics.

He was hovering near the front door with Scout and I walked over to them. "Hey," I said. "I'm glad you could come."

"I'm not sure I can stay," he said. "It's kind of crowded."

A pair of cute twenty-something boys had a Papillon that shivered with fright, with a yip that could cut through ice. Two women, both in hospital scrubs. One had a pit bull mix, the other a poodle. Then a flighty-looking guy with an orange streak in his hair whose puppy looked very much liked Scout, the same gold and white coloring and the same pointed snout.

The fear showed on Alex's face. Afraid of getting shown up by a girl? Afraid of another dog attacking Scout? Or something else? "I tell you what," I said. "I'll give you the last chair against the wall, right by the door, and if either your or Scout feel uncomfortable you can scoot outside."

Something warred behind his eyes as he looked from left to right inside the room.

"All right, we'll give it a try," he said. He stepped inside and immediately moved the last chair in line a few feet farther away from the nurse with the poodle. Scout sat obediently on the floor beside him, though he occasionally looked over at the poodle with interest.

First up was the “heel” command. I started with the guy with the orange hair because his dog was so lively he was disrupting everyone else. His name was Kenny and his dog was Cheyenne.

“Not after the western town but after the actor?” he said, with a question mark at the end of his sentence. “Cheyenne Jackson? He’s my favorite. He’s so handsome.”

I noticed he gave Alex a side glance. While Alex’s face was longer and narrower than the actor’s he had the same height and square build. I took Cheyenne’s lead and told him to heel. He looked up at me like I was speaking a foreign language to him—which of course I was.

Cheyenne had the same long snout as Scout, the same square head and gold coloring. And the same huge paws. Both were going to be big dogs. But right now he was a puppy, and I could manhandle him into position beside me.

When he walked there for a minute, I gave him a treat and praised him with “Good heel.” Then we started again and immediately he wanted to sniff other dogs.

I yanked gently on the lead and said, “Cheyenne. Heel.” It took a couple of tries before he got the picture.

I spread everyone out in the room and told them to practice. I was surprised at how well Scout did. It was clear that Scout and the pit bull mix were the best students. The Papillon and Kenny’s Cheyenne were the worst.

While everyone continued to practice, I walked over to Alex. “Have you been working with him?”

“I bought a book on dog training,” he said. “And like I told you, I have a lot of time to work with him. I learned you have to get his attention first and

then demonstrate what you want him to do, and praise him when he does it. Just like you're teaching."

"It's obviously working. What are you using for rewards?"

"I ran through those T-bone treats the first day," he said. "So I cut up a couple of hot dogs into small chunks and nuked them in the microwave. Scout and I practice walking, both in the house and outside, and I reward him with hot dog bits and lots of praise. He's a smart dog, and he already understands sit and stay."

"Great. I can use him later."

I walked to the front of room before Alex could protest. All the dogs were learning to heel, and eventually I staged a parade up and down the room so both dogs and owners could see how heel worked when they were out and about.

It was comical to watch Kenny and Cheyenne try to follow instructions. The only thing Cheyenne could do was lie down and roll over—and I had a feeling that wasn't something he'd learned.

After that we worked on sit, and then lie down. Some of the dogs were too wild to stay still for long, and others were hard to rouse once they'd slumped down to the floor. But I've seen all those problems before.

I had a feeling Alex would try and sneak out as soon as the class was over, but selfishly I wanted to spend more time with him and Scout. So I positioned myself by the door as I called an end to the class.

I praised everyone and told them I was looking forward to seeing them the following Saturday morning. As I did, I body-blocked Alex so that he couldn't get around me easily. My scheme worked, because he was the last one to leave.

“You’re doing a great job with Scout,” I said. “You have time for a cup of coffee? I can share some other things you can work on with him during the week, since he’s doing so well.”

Once again, I could tell from the way Alex’s eyes darted back and forth that there was a battle going on in his head.

“Do you know Java Boys?” I asked. “They’ve got a great patio where humans and dogs can hang out. Lots of space between tables.”

That must have been the right suggestion, because his body relaxed. “Yeah, I know it,” he said. “Scout and I have been there.”

“Great. I’ll meet you there in ten minutes. I have to clean up.”

“I can help with that.” He looked at his dog. “Scout. Lie down.” The pup obeyed easily, spreading his paws out in front of him and his legs behind. He watched closely as Alex helped me stack the chairs and stow my toys and treats in a cabinet.

Java Boys was only a few blocks away, so we walked there together. Alex’s head swiveled, alert to everything going on around us. Alex paid for my coffee while I sat outside with Scout.

“I used to walk past this place when I first moved here,” he said. “But I never came in. I mean, it’s very open and welcoming, but I didn’t know anything about all the fancy coffee drinks and I didn’t want to look like a fool.”

“But you have come in,” I said.

He nodded. “After I got Scout. Something about him makes it easier for me to face new challenges.”

“So, tell me about yourself. Where are you from?”

“Carmel, Indiana,” he said. “Suburb of Indianapolis. Two years of college there, then I went into the Army. My ASVAB score sent me to combat engineering. Four years in the service, then discharged.”

“What brought you to Florida?”

“I wanted somewhere warm. No more Indiana winters for this boy. And there’s a good VA hospital in Miami. How did you get into dog training?”

Interesting how quickly he shifted the conversation to me. Either he was a sophisticated dater, or he didn’t like to talk about himself.

“I always loved animals. For ages I wanted to be a veterinarian and I took every chance I had to volunteer with vets or at the shelter.” I laughed. “When I was in high school I put an ad in the local penny saver to say that I was a teenaged girl who wanted to work with animals, and I put my phone number.”

Alex sipped his coffee, and Scout lapped at the cup of water Alex had brought out for him.

“I started getting all these weirdo calls,” I continued. “Men who would say they were animals and wanted to work with me.”

Alex’s mouth opened wide. “Wow.”

“Yeah, I had no idea there were so many strange men in the world. I finally had to change my cell number.” I was embarrassed by that long-ago faux pas, so I turned the conversation back to him. I was also curious to know more about him, and see how quickly he’d move it back to me. “How long have you lived here?” I asked.

“Six months. How about you?”

I laughed. He was good at deflecting. “I’m a second-generation Floridian,” I said. “My grandpa was sent to Coral Gables to recuperate after World War II. A fancy hotel called the Biltmore, converted to a military hospital for a while. He met my grandma, who was a nurse there, and they both loved Florida and decided to stay. My dad and I were both born in the same hospital in downtown Miami, Jackson.”

“And your mom?”

“She was born in San Juan, and came to Miami when she was eighteen to stay with cousins. Met my dad, and settled down with him.”

“That’s sweet.”

I shook my head. “Sadly, it wasn’t. Cubans moved into Miami and they were followed by all kinds of immigrants from Latin and South America. My dad was an air conditioning repairman and his company was bought by Cubans, and suddenly everybody around him was speaking Spanish. He lost his job and had trouble finding another. He blamed it all on Spanish-speaking people, including my mother.”

“That sucks.”

“Yeah. He started hitting her when I was about twelve, and when I was fourteen he broke both of her arms. We had to move into a shelter for abused women then.”

I looked down. I was surprised that I’d opened up so much with Alex, who was still a relative stranger. I was usually much more circumspect about my background.

“I’m sorry,” Alex said gently. “I was lucky. Good parents who had enough money to get by, didn’t fight too much.”

“Are your folks nearby?”

He shook his head. “My dad died when I was in junior college, and then my mom was killed in a highway crash when I was in Afghanistan. My aunt and uncle took over the estate, sold the house and gave away most things, so by the time I got back there was nothing left for me except a bank account.”

I reached out and touched his arm, and his skin was warm under my fingers. He flinched, but I kept my hand there. Somehow, I sensed he needed this human connection. I said, “I’m sorry. No brothers or sisters?”

“Nope. You?”

I took my hand away. I didn’t want to appear forward. “Older sister. She was able to get out when my dad started acting up. Last I heard she was in Colorado somewhere.”

We sat and drank our coffee as Scout dozed beside us, on his side with his legs splayed. I liked the way we had both been able to open up to each other—sometimes when I went on dates the guy was too focused on himself, or we only talked about mindless stuff, like movies and social media.

But Alex seemed like a guy who had opinions, and I wanted to know more about them. The alarm on my watch beeped and I looked down. “Sorry, I’ve got a client in a half hour,” I said. “Nice lady, but she can’t discipline her dog for anything. I have to work hard every week to get her to stop spoiling him.”

Alex grinned. I liked it when he smiled. It made me happy. But I had to go.

“Thanks for the coffee. I’ll see you next week, all right?”

“We’ll be there.”



5: FRIEND: ALEX

During the next week, I worked with Scout on basic techniques I had learned from Grace, along with a few things I picked up online and what I'd learned about training in the Army. But the book made it clear that if Scout was going to become the service dog I needed, there was a lot he had to learn. Even if I was nervous, I had to keep going to Grace's obedience class.

Combat Engineering had been a good fit for me in the Army. I enjoyed the classroom part of the training, and it was fun to learn how to blow stuff up—at least at first.

Now I was happier to build than to destroy. I was always good with my hands. When I was a kid I worked with my dad in his home shop, building and repairing stuff. Then as a teenager and college student, I worked construction in the summer. I had accumulated a collection of hand tools, and fortunately my aunt and uncle held onto them for me.

When I brought them to Florida, I wanted something to do with them. I surfed around and found a group that donated toys to kids in shelters, and then discovered plans online for a small wooden dollhouse.

I chose that project because it was something I could build without a whole workshop, and I thought it would be a good deed.

Scout and I got into a regular routine. I spent a couple of hours during the morning on customer calls, then took a break to work with him. I had some trouble convincing him that he wasn't supposed to chase ducks or squirrels, and every now and then he'd nearly pull my arm off going after one.

I tried to be consistent, telling him no, then praising him when he returned to normal behavior. After our walk, I'd reward both of us with a stop at Java Boys, where I bought a coffee for myself and a plain croissant for Scout. I tore it into tiny pieces and fed it to him by hand.

"Watch my fingers!" I said when his teeth got too close to them.

He gulped whatever I gave him eagerly and wanted more. When I told him that was all, he slumped grumpily at my feet, but he was always ready to jump up and be happy again.

I got friendly with Akimbo, chatting with him about the weather and local news. Once I explained that Scout was a service dog in training, Akimbo invited me to bring him inside, and I found a regular spot by the wall, where I could be on my own and have a clear view of the whole café.

Then I'd spend some time working on my dollhouse until dinner time. I bought a piece of plywood at Home Depot and used a small Japanese handsaw to cut them into narrow planks, which I glued down as flooring in the living room, dining rooms and bedrooms. Then I glued tiny bathroom tiles to the floor in the kitchen and the bathroom. It was very satisfying once they were all down.

Once Scout and I had eaten, we'd take a long walk around Hollywood. After that I'd settle down at the computer and work on customer calls until midnight. I'd found that if I tired myself out during the day, I could sleep at night, with Scout there beside me.

Thursday afternoon I was sitting at an outdoor table at Java Boys with Scout when the orange-haired guy from the obedience class walked in with his puppy. They came right up to us, crowding in our space. "Your dog and mine look like they could be brothers."

His name was Kenny, I remembered. His frisky gold and white puppy was straining as Kenny held tight to the handle of one of those extendable leashes. While Scout sat obediently by my right leg, Cheyenne romped and tugged, clearly out of his control.

“Where did you get yours?” Kenny asked. “Cheyenne! Stop jumping!”

The dog ignored him and went down on his front paws.

“Scout? At the animal shelter on Griffin Road.”

Scout lunged at Cheyenne and they rolled around on the floor. “Scout! No!” I said, and I tugged sharply on his lead.

“Oh, let them play,” Kenny said. He wore a black polo shirt that hugged his skinny frame, and a tribal tattoo peeked out from under the right sleeve. “They’re puppies.”

I had decided to wait until Scout was trained to register him as a service dog, so I didn’t have that excuse. Scout looked up at me and I shrugged, and he returned to playing. He had begun to understand the rules—that I was in charge, for one. Clearly Kenny hadn’t established that yet with his puppy.

“Did anyone ever tell you that you look like Cheyenne Jackson? He’s like my dream guy. So handsome!” He eyed me. “Same dark hair, dark eyes, same build, though your face is longer and narrower than his. You look like you work out. Do you? I go to the Power Fitness Gym sometimes.”

What an idiot, I thought. “No, I have some equipment in my house. I’m not big on organized fitness.”

“Sorry, I’m babbling,” Kenny said. “I do that when I get nervous.” He took a deep breath. “Your dog and mine really do look alike. Hold on. I got Cheyenne at the same shelter as you did, a couple of weeks ago.”

“There were two puppies from the same litter,” I said grudgingly. “I took the calm one. I guess you got the wild one.”

“That’s for sure,” Kenny said. “I was worried that Grace was going to kick us out of the obedience class.”

“You need to work with him yourself,” I said. “You can’t count on a class once a week to train him.”

“You’ve done well with Scout. You think you could help me with Cheyenne?” He looked sad. “I’ve really bonded with him, but if I don’t get him calmed down, I’m going to get kicked out of my apartment.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I think it’s more a difference in temperament.”

“Come on, we should set up a play date for them,” Kenny said. “You know, because they’re brothers.”

“I’m training Scout to be a service dog,” I said, finally playing that card. “He doesn’t need play dates.”

“Every dog needs some time to play,” Kenny said. He reached down to scratch behind Scout’s ear. “Don’t you, Scouty.” Scout shifted his head so he could lick Kenny’s hand. “See? He likes me.”

“I don’t know,” I said. I was jealous that my dog would be so friendly with Kenny when we hardly knew him, but that was part of the breed, I guess. I’d read somewhere that a golden was so friendly he’d hold the flashlight in his mouth for a burglar.

“Oh, come on, it’ll be fun,” Kenny said. “My community just put in a dog park. Why don’t you come home with me now?”

I was getting a vibe from Kenny that I need to squash right away. “I’m straight,” I said. “Not bi, not curious.”

“I kind of thought so, from the way you and Grace were getting along. Oh well, so you and I won’t play together. But can you still help me with Cheyenne?”

“Where do you live?” I asked. I didn’t travel too far from home because I was worried that I might have an attack and need the comfort and shelter of my own place.

“Two blocks from here, behind Hollywood City Hall.”

“I guess I can do that.” We exchanged cell numbers and email addresses, and then I stood up. This was already a longer conversation than I’d had with anyone other than Grace, and I was feeling nervous.

Kenny and Cheyenne trailed behind us. Then Kenny stopped in front of a BMW SUV. He popped the hatch and grabbed Cheyenne by the scruff of the neck. “Get in,” Kenny said. “We have to go home.”

The dog cowered in fear, his tail between his legs. “Please, Cheyenne?” Kenny said.

“Give me Cheyenne’s lead,” I said. Kenny did, and for a second I was back in the Army. I liked the discipline of the military, the way everybody had a job to do and everybody followed orders. I realized I’d missed that.

“Scout, sit,” I said, with my hand flat and parallel to the ground. He obeyed easily. I repeated the command for Cheyenne. He looked at me, then at Scout, then he sat. “Good boys,” I said.

I praised both of them and chucked them both under the ears.

“Scout, up.” I pointed to the ledge of the vehicle. We hadn’t practiced that command, but I hoped that Scout was smart enough to figure out what I wanted.

He was, and I grinned broadly as he jumped easily into the car. Before I could say anything to Cheyenne, he had jumped up beside Scout and curled next to him.

“You’re a magician,” Kenny said. He shook his head.

“Put your hand on Cheyenne’s flank and keep him in place,” I said. I pointed to the pavement and said, “Scout, down.”

My dog looked up at me. He was very comfortable there with his brother next to him. I could see he was tired after the effort of concentrating, too.

“How are you going to get him into your own car now?” Kenny asked.

“Didn’t drive here,” I said. “We walked.” I repeated the motion. “Scout, down.” He ignored me.

Kenny reached up and closed the hatch. “It’s settled, then. We’re giving you a ride to my place.”

“You don’t have to,” I protested, but Kenny was already walking around to the driver’s door. I didn’t like riding in a car with anyone else. The confined space made me too nervous. But it didn’t look like I had a choice, so I had to man up.

I slid into the seat beside Kenny. The leather embraced me, and there was plenty of room for my legs and my head. It smelled clean and fresh. “Nice ride,” I said.

“I got it a year ago,” he said. “My disposable income went up and I decided to treat myself.” He put the car in gear and backed out of the parking space. As he’d said, his apartment wasn’t far away, and I wondered why he didn’t just walk the dog. It was clear Kenny needed a lot of lessons in puppy care, and I wasn’t sure I was up to the task.

“Cheyenne kind of sucks all the air out of the house, you know?” Kenny said, as we pulled up in front of a 1960s era apartment building. “It’s always feed me, walk me, play with me.”

“Dogs are like that,” I said. He parked, and I got out of the car and walked around to the hatch, which rose pneumatically.

“Scout, stay.” I pointed at him. “Cheyenne, down.”

Cheyenne jumped out and I grabbed the handle of his lead before he could run away.

“Scout, down,” I said. Scout jumped out and stood beside me as the hatch closed on its own. I hadn’t minded riding in Kenny’s car at all. Maybe I was a BMW kind of guy and I’d never known it.

There was a fenced yard behind Kenny’s building, and we walked back there. While I held onto both dogs, he went inside and returned with a huge bag of the T-bone steak training treats. I hoped Scout wouldn’t get spoiled and would happily go back to the hot dog bits. But I knew dogs liked people food so I wasn’t too worried.

I did what Grace had done at the training, modeling behavior with Scout and then getting Kenny and Cheyenne to imitate us. Cheyenne was still a wild boy, but something about Scout’s demeanor calmed him and after a solid hour of training he was getting better at sit, down and heel.

I could tell Scout was tired, though, from the way his tongue hung down and he moved a bit more slowly, so I called a halt. Kenny brought out glasses of cold lemonade for us and we sat in the shade of a big tree with red flowers.

“You’re so at ease with dogs,” Kenny said. “It’s like you and Scout have been together forever. And you’re good at training. Even I feel calmer being around you.”

I realized that I hadn't felt nervous the whole time I'd been with Kenny and Cheyenne. Maybe this having-a-friend thing might work out.



6: CLUELESS BUT CUTE: GRACE

I met Becca for dinner on Sunday. She had a graduate degree in poetry, which she said was a license for unemployment, but I'd convinced her to get a part-time job as an English professor at the local community college. It seemed to be working out for her—she'd met other people interested in writing and literature, and though she didn't like grading papers she enjoyed contact with students.

“What's new?” I asked, as we sat down at an outdoor table in downtown Hollywood.

“Good news,” she said. “Enrollment is up, so the department chair said she can offer me four courses during the summer term.”

“That's great. But I thought you were going to take the summer off and write. Aren't you trying to finish a chapbook for a competition?”

“I have to make hay while the sun shines,” she said. “That's the way my dad would put it. I don't know how long this teaching gig will last, so I need to take the money while I can.” She looked down at the table and I knew there was something more.

“And?” I asked.

“One of the fossil professors just announced he's retiring. Seventy-two. Can you believe it? He's been at the college for forty years.”

I shivered. “I can't imagine having a job for that long. I mean, I love working with dogs, but it's not a career path. I'm too old to go to veterinary school and I don't particularly want to be a vet tech for the rest of my life. I

have a friend who's a wildlife officer but she carries a gun and spends all her time in the Everglades. That's not for me."

"What about going back to school to learn how to use animals in therapy?" Becca asked. "You already have an associate's degree. You could probably do some courses and get a certificate that would enable you to build your business from just obedience training."

"I've thought about it," I said. "But right now I'm happy doing what I'm doing."

I sipped my drink. "But back to you. Do you want to teach during the summer?"

"The department chair said that if I take the summer work, she'll give me what she calls a full-time temp job for the next academic year, to fill his spot. And that will give me an inside track for a full-time, tenure-track job."

"Is that what you want?"

She sighed. "I'm never going to make a living as a poet," she said. "A teaching job will give me security, and they'll send me to conferences and pay for courses. And I didn't realize how much I missed having people to talk about poetry with."

"You talk to me."

"I know. And you've given me some great feedback. But it's not the same." The server came over and we ordered cocktails.

"What's up with you?"

"I started a new obedience class yesterday. Some good dogs, some difficult ones."

"I thought you said there are no bad dogs, only bad owners."

“That’s true. But this one guy has a dog that’s so hyper you could light up Hollywood with his energy.”

She looked at me. She knew me as well as I knew her. “What about his owner? Is he cute?”

“Not that guy. He plays for the other team. But...”

“Yes?” Becca asked.

“There’s this guy, his name is Alex.”

“The one you met at the pet store.”

“I didn’t realize I told you about him,” I said.

“You did. How he was totally clueless but cute. And muscular.”

I felt myself blushing and I was glad that the server brought our drinks and I could grab my margarita.

“You like him,” Becca said. “What’s wrong with him?”

I put the margarita glass down on the table a bit too hard. “What do you mean? Why does something have to be wrong with him for me to like him?”

“Duh. Because of your track record. What about Garrett?”

“Garrett had problems. But it wasn’t like I fell for him because he was nasty and abusive.”

“I think maybe you did,” Becca said. “You’re never going to get your father to love you, Grace. And it’s time you started looking for good men instead of men with problems.”

“I know that.” My father had died a year after my mom, and I had a lot of unresolved issues about both of them. Dr. Altman had helped with those.

“Alex doesn’t have problems,” I said, probably more strongly than I should have. “And Garrett was very charming when I met him. We liked the same movies, we had great dinners together, and he was very attentive in bed. It’s just that he started to get possessive and angry. I didn’t have any idea he’d turn out like that.”

“How well do you know this guy Alex?”

I shrugged. “We met at the pet store. And he brought his dog for training.”

“So you’ve interacted with him exactly twice. I’m telling you, Grace, you need to go slowly. He could turn out to be another jerk.”

“He’s so sweet with his dog,” I protested. “And they have such a good rapport.” I sipped my drink again. “I admit, I’m attracted to his body. He has muscles for days and I keep wondering how it would feel to be wrapped in his arms. Safe.” I smiled. “Sexy.”

“Do you talk to him?”

“We went out for coffee after class yesterday. We talked about our jobs and our families. He was in combat engineering in the Army, which makes me think he could do a lot better than online customer service.”

“Don’t start that,” Becca said.

“What?”

“Changing him. Maybe working online is exactly the right thing for him. You don’t know enough about him to start shaping him to what you want him to be.”

Maybe Becca was right. I remembered how twitchy Alex had been when I had to drag him into the training session. There was probably something

wrong with him. After all, I liked him. And with my track record, that wasn't a good thing.

I felt the need to change the subject. "How are Henry and Navajo?"

Becca had a pair of rescue dogs. Henry was a take-charge Yorkie mix, and Navajo a submissive dachshund. Both were reasonably well-trained, but I had worked with them to get over their anxieties and help them live together.

"Yesterday I took them with me to visit my parents, and Henry wanted to drive," Becca said. "He was so adorable, climbing into my lap and leaning on the steering wheel. "Navajo was happy to stay in his carrier on the back seat."

"They're good boys," I said. We settled up the bill and said goodbye, and I left Becca wondering why I was the only person I knew who didn't have a dog.

My week ran by fast. I had a couple of emergency sessions with a client who was about to go out of town and wanted me to work with his dog and the woman who would be pet-sitting in his house, and I was called in to work a couple of extra shifts at the pet store. That's when I ran into Alex again.



7: SMALL STEPS: ALEX

The dollhouse was quickly taking shape. I had the floors, walls and ceilings in place. I ordered tiny light fixtures on Amazon, and I installed them over the bedroom and the living room and the kitchen, and ran wires to a battery pack attached to the rear wall. It was so satisfying to see the rooms light up.

I spent most of rest of the week working and training Scout. He was such a fast learner that I was tempted to move quickly, but everything I read online said that the key to training was repetition and taking things slowly.

Wednesday I took Scout to the pet store to pick up some more food, now that I knew what he liked. I spotted a vest that said, “Service Dog in Training,” and I thought that was true enough that I could get it for him.

I took it off the rack and knelt down beside him to try it on. I fiddled with the clasps for a minute, but my hands were too big and clumsy and they started to shake.

“We’ve got to stop meeting like this.”

I looked up to see Grace smiling at me. “Is this your natural habitat? You hang around here looking for clueless guys?”

“Actually I work here,” she said. “Part time, in addition to doing the training sessions. It pays the rent.” She looked down at the vest in my hands. “You buying that for Scout?”

I nodded.

“You know it’s a bad idea to pretend your pet is a service dog, just to take him into the grocery with you.”

“He’s going to be a service dog, when I get him trained,” I protested. I could tell that wasn’t enough for her. Time to man up. “I had some bad experiences in the military,” I said. “I still get jittery around loud noises and I have trouble sleeping. I’m hoping Scout can calm me down.”

“Why don’t you get a service dog who’s already trained?”

“Do you know how expensive they are?” I asked. “Or if you get one from an organization, how long the wait is? I couldn’t wait any longer.”

She looked at me as if she was seeing me for the first time. “Let me show you how this works.” She knelt down beside me, with Scout between us. “This piece goes under his belly, and snaps up here,” she said, lining up a latch by the side of his neck. “And this other one goes around his chest.”

“You make it look so easy,” I grumbled, as she slid the latch in over his soft, golden fur.

“You’ll get used to it. Fortunately Scout seems very patient.”

“He is. You know he and Cheyenne were littermates?”

“Cheyenne the wild dog? With the equally wild dad?”

“That’s the one. Kenny’s afraid you’ll kick him out of the class if he can’t get Cheyenne to behave better, so I’ve been helping him.”

“That’s good,” she said. She stood up. “I see you got more food. He likes that one?”

I stood too. “Yeah, he does.” We looked at each other awkwardly for a moment. I had the urge to ask her out on a real date, but I knew I was still too messed up to drag someone else into my problems.

“Do you need anything else?” she asked.

“No, I’m good.”

“OK, then. I’ll see you Saturday.” She walked away, and I kicked myself. What was it going to take to get me to ask her out? She could always say no, right? Especially now that I’d admitted to her I had some PTSD. Of course she didn’t know how bad it was, and I wasn’t about to tell her.

After Scout and I got home from shopping, I popped my evening pills, then turned on my computer and began to take calls. Scout settled down beside me with one of the sweet potato chews Grace had recommended.

My first client was a man who said he suffered from anxiety, and that he needed medication to keep him on an even keel. I could relate to that. “How can I help you?” I asked.

“When I tried to use my health care spending card to pay for my pills yesterday, it was rejected. Why?”

“Let me pull up your account,” I said. It took a minute or two but I was able to access his records and see that he still had money available. “You say you wanted to pay for a prescription but your card was rejected?”

“Not a prescription. My pills just went generic so I wanted to buy the off-brand.”

“Your account doesn’t let you use your card for non-prescription sleep aids and sedatives,” I said. “I’m afraid you’ll have to stick to the prescription ones if you want reimbursement.”

I had an idea. “Hold on and let me check something.”

I’d had a client the other day who asked about using a medical discount card she got in the mail. I found a link to it and found that if he used it, he could pay a lower copay for the prescription drugs, and use his spending account.

I went back to him and explained it. “I thought those cards were a scam,” he said.

“I’ve had other clients use them,” I said. “But do your due diligence, and don’t give out any personal information. They’ll get whatever they need from the pharmacy.”

He thanked me and I went on to the next call.

It felt good to be productive, to have information that people needed and be able to pass it on to them. Not all the calls ended so well. Sometimes people had run out of funds on their card even though they insisted they couldn’t have. Or there were screw-ups with their employers that I couldn’t fix.

I was hoping that having Scout around would reassure me enough that I could get back on a normal sleep schedule, and then maybe even get a job that was better suited to my qualifications.

I loved the work I did in the Army, constructing bridges, clearing barriers with explosives, and detecting and avoiding mines and other environmental hazards. I discovered that I had a knack for quick and creative engineering solutions, constructing fighting positions, fixed and floating bridges, and building obstacles and defense positions. I wasn’t sure how much demand there was for that kind of thing in the real world, but once I was emotionally stable I’d start to investigate.

I worked steadily for about six hours, until it was eleven o’clock on the West Coast and most of the call volume had died down. Scout and I played tug-a-rope for a while. His jaws were getting stronger and so were his legs, so I didn’t have to hold back and we could really tussle. After a while, though, he gave up and went back to sleep.

I turned to the doll house. It was calming to cut and sand the wood, fitting pieces together, making sure there were no sharp edges or nails to hurt tiny fingers. So far I had the basic frame—back wall, roof, and several levels of floors. It looked like a hurricane had hit, knocking off the front wall and blowing out all the furniture. Kind of like my life, which was a work in progress.

Scout had already helped a lot. I didn't get so nervous when I was out with him, and it was relaxing to pet him and groom him. And hey, I'd already had a real conversation with a cute girl, even if she was probably being nice to me because I was her training client.

I began building furniture for the dollhouse. Some pieces that were too small and fussy for my big hands would have to come from online sources, but I measured the bedrooms and sketched out where I could put furniture, then built a couple of tiny beds and nightstands. I found a beautiful scrap of black walnut and made a dining room table.

In the morning, I'd stand up and stretch. I pulled on a pair of board shorts and, because the air in the house was already hot and humid, a sleeveless T-shirt. I moved over to my exercise mat, and looked around at my free weights.

One morning, I was bored with working out on my own. In the Army, I'd always had workout buddies. We'd motivate each other to add weight or reps, and critique each other's form. I missed that. But could I handle being around other people? Would I freak out at a loud noise, or someone making contact with me the way that guy on the street had grabbed my biceps?

I was pretty sure that I couldn't take Scout with me. What would he do, anyway, while I worked out?

There was a twenty-four-hour gym a few blocks away on Hollywood Boulevard, and I'd often peered in the big windows as Scout and I passed. It looked clean and welcoming, with lots of different kinds of machines, from treadmills to leg presses to rowing machines. I'd be able to vary my workout. And it would be a good step toward my goal of getting my life back.

Scout seemed surprised when I tried to walk out of the house without him. He crowded me at the front door and barked a couple of times, as if he was saying, "Hey, did you forget about me?"

I pushed around him, though, using my leg to hold him back. I walked quickly to the gym, afraid that if I slowed down I'd lose my nerve.

The guy behind the front desk was about fifty, very buff, with sleeve tattoos down both arms. "I'm Frank," he said. "Welcome to Power Fitness."

He reached out to shake my hand. I hesitated, but then shook it. "I'm Alex. I'm thinking about joining." Frank looked me up and down. "You look like you're already in great shape. But we have a lot of terrific equipment here, especially if you're looking to vary your workout."

"That's exactly what I want." He went through the plans, and after a couple of minutes I started to feel comfortable. I signed up for a trial membership.

"Let me get some stats on you," Frank said. "Come on over to the scales." He wrote down my weight, and had me sit at one of those machines that measures your blood pressure, your body fat and so on.

When I stood up, he pulled out a tape measure.

"Raise your arms."

I felt my adrenaline rise. "Can we skip that part?" He raised an eyebrow, but said, "Sure. I can estimate your numbers. But if you want to track your

progress you'll have to have someone take real measurements.”

“I'm good for now.” I could feel my anxiety level rising and even though Frank was a nice guy with the best intentions, I didn't want him to touch me.

We finished the paperwork. “You want to get in a workout now?”

I shook my head. “I'm more of a late-night guy,” I said. “I'll come back.”

As soon as I got out of the gym I took off at a jog back to the house. It was a quick run, but it was enough to work off the anxiety I'd felt, and having Scout welcome me as if he thought I'd abandoned him helped, too. Small steps, I thought. Small steps.



8: TRAINING DOGS: GRACE

Before the next training session, I downloaded some materials on how to train a service dog. I skipped through the parts about dogs for the hearing-impaired or the vision-impaired. That kind of need wasn't Alex's problem. Even the material about psychiatric service dogs didn't seem relevant. I didn't think Alex needed Scout to enter a dark room and turn on a light for him.

I hadn't seen Alex exhibit any repetitive behaviors. I wondered if Scout was supposed to remind him to take his medication. But there were alarms on the phone for that.

Alex had said he got jittery around loud noises and had trouble sleeping. The information I read said that therapy dogs could also be used to relieve stress and bring comfort to victims of traumatic events or disasters. That sounded more like what Alex needed. But how could I help him train Scout for that?

The basics were the kind of thing we did in class anyway—training dogs to let their parents know when they needed to go out, for example. Teach the dog to focus on the handler and ignore distractions. Scout was getting some of that in the class already, especially with Cheyenne around. If he could ignore his rambunctious littermate, he was on a good path.

The last one was more intriguing. The idea was to socialize the dog with the objective of having them remain on task in the presence of unfamiliar people, places, sights, sounds, scents, and other animals. That was something

I could talk to Alex about, and perhaps help him with outside of the classroom.

When I talked to Becca that night and explained what I wanted to do, she said, “Are you just doing this so you can have an excuse to see him?”

“He seems like a sweet guy, just kind of lost,” I said. “And I like Scout a lot. I want to help them bond.”

“I don’t want you to get your heart broken again,” Becca said. “But working with the two of them could be good practice for you on how to use animals in therapy. And speaking of which, Navajo is getting really in tune with my moods when I’m writing. When I’m happy he sleeps cuddled up with Henry, but if I’m having trouble with a poem he comes over to sit in my lap.”

“That’s sweet. But make sure you’re not using him as a distraction. Can you actually write with him there?”

“I kind of talk to him,” Becca said. “I read the poem out and thump the rhythm into his belly. He seems to like that, and by the time he’s ready to jump down I’m back in my head and I can keep going.”

“That’s excellent. And Henry sleeps through it?”

“You know Henry. He’s all about food. If I go anywhere near the kitchen he’s right there. Navajo just wants love.”

Every dog has a personality, I thought, after I hung up. His or her own unique motivations. What was Scout’s? Food, love, service?

Monday morning I had to drive over to the Lakes neighborhood in Hollywood, where I had a very wealthy client with a very difficult dog. The house was beautiful, long and low, hugging the shoreline of South Lake, with a dock out back where the owners kept a sailboat.

Mr. and Mrs. Somogyi had emigrated to the United States in the 1960s. They were university students during the Hungarian Revolution, and when the Soviet Union quashed their fight, they had to leave. Both were engineers, and Mr. Somogyi had invented something to do with push-button phones, which enabled them to live well.

Their problem was with Ferko, their Vizsla. He was a year old and almost completely unmanageable.

The Vizsla was a red-coated hunting dog who needed a lot of exercise and was also a sponge for human companionship. They needed a lot of physical and mental stimulation, which I thought the Somogyis were too old to provide.

I had been referred to them by one of my other training clients who lived nearby. I showed up at the house and Mrs. Somogyi opened the door, one hand on the collar of a beautiful dog with long silky ears that framed a sensitive and loving facial expression.

She was probably in her early sixties, with blonde hair showing dark roots. “No, Ferko!” she said. “Sit! Stay!” Ferko ignored her, trying to stick his nose to me, and she had to tug the dog backwards to let me in.

Poor Mrs. Somogyi looked worn out and it was only nine in the morning. She had bags under her eyes, and her lipstick had been haphazardly applied. She wore a beautiful silk dress, though, and a strand of pearls around her neck.

I felt underdressed in my T-shirt and shorts. But I was there to work with her dog, not to impress her with my attire. At least my blonde ponytail was neat, and I’d worn my favorite pendant, of a shaggy dog at attention.

“This is Ferko,” she said, when we got in the house. With the door closed, she let go of his collar and he rushed toward me. “It’s Hungarian for free. Unfortunately he takes that name too literally and we can’t get him to obey anything.”

She shook her head. “I can’t even get dressed in the morning without him barking or nudging me. If I go to the grocery when I come home he’s torn up a sofa cushion or chewed one of my husband’s shoes. I haven’t been to the beauty parlor in six months.”

I leaned down and rubbed behind his ears, and he opened his mouth in a doggy grin. Then he rushed back to Mrs. Somogyi. We sat in the living room on a sofa that had probably once been very expensive, but the cushions were ripped and the ball feet had chew marks. He sprawled on the floor beside her, his head resting on her shoe.

“We have had dogs all our lives. As soon as we had a house, we got our first Vizsla, Katalin. She was an angel and so sweet with our children. She used to run and play with them, and she slept beside our daughter. Then when our kids were grown we got Babetta. My husband and I were still working, so we had a housekeeper. Babetta was with her all day, and with us in the evenings and on the weekends. And she was fine.”

Ferko got up from the floor and nosed her, and she stroked his head. “This boy has been more trouble than Katalin and Babetta combined.”

“I can see a couple of problems,” I said. “First, there are differences between male and female dogs. Males are often more playful, and more protective. Combine that with the Vizsla’s natural tendencies to bond with their owners, and you’ve got the kind of obsessive behavior Ferko is displaying.”

“I knew we should have gotten another female,” Mrs. Somogyi said. “But the breeder only had boys left, and my husband fell in love with Ferko.”

“Well, you have him now, so the key is to help him become the dog he needs to be to live happily with you.”

Ferko finally got tired of being petted and lay back down on the floor, but still very close to his mom. “You said the first problem is that Ferko is a boy. What are the others?”

I tried to phrase my comment gently. Sixty was the new forty, and all that.

“Older pet parents often don’t have the energy to deal with puppies,” I said. “I encourage people over sixty, let’s say, to look for an older dog, one who’s already trained and mellowed. But that doesn’t mean Ferko can’t be trained.”

“What can we do?”

“I’d like to watch you interact with him for a few minutes,” I said. “Does he obey any commands?”

“Sometimes.” She stood up, and Ferko jumped up with her. “Ferko, sit,” she said. Ferko stared up at her.

“Have you trained him with hand signals, too?” I asked. She shook her head.

“We hired trainers for Katalin and Babetta. But you’re the third trainer we’ve tried with Ferko, and both of the others gave up. They said he was too much dog for us and we should return him to the breeder. But we’ve both fallen in love with him.”

“I’m sorry to say that you and your husband are going to have to do the bulk of the training. I can show you what to do, but you have to reinforce it with Ferko.”

I stood up and showed her how to use her hand and her voice to indicate the sit command to Ferko. He obeyed, which meant that the previous trainers had done something with him. I could tell he was a smart boy.

We spent an hour going through the commands Ferko already knew, but wasn’t obeying when his mother gave them. She also hadn’t been reinforcing with treats, so we worked on that as well.

Then we took Ferko out to the fenced-in back yard, which overlooked Hollywood’s South Lake. I threw a high-intensity rubber bone for him, and he raced after it and then brought it back to me, panting eagerly. A sailboat was passing on the Intracoastal, and for a moment I realized what a blessed life I had, living in a tropical paradise, spending time on a beautiful day playing with a dog, and getting paid for it.

Mrs. Somogyi didn’t have the throwing strength, so I suggested she look around the neighborhood for a kid she could hire to play with Ferko. “If you get someone you trust, then they can play in the yard and you can have a few minutes to yourself,” I said.

“The beauty parlor,” she said, with a sigh. I also suggested that once Ferko was better trained, she look into taking him to doggy day care a few hours a day a few times a week. “That will tire him out and help with his socialization,” I said. “Not to mention giving you a break.”

We agreed that I’d come back a week later and continue to work with Ferko. “And you have my cell number,” I said. “If he gets too much for you, give me a call.”

“You’re a life saver, Grace,” she said. She looked down at Ferko, who was sprawled by her side, and I saw the love in her expression. If she could educate him, I was sure he’d be a delightful addition to her family.

As I drove home, I realized how much I had enjoyed the morning, even though Ferko was a handful. The experience reinforced with me that whatever my career path was, it would certainly involve dogs.

I was thinking about Ferko when my cell phone rang, and I answered it without looking at who was calling. “This is Grace,” I said.

“It’s Mercy.” I was so surprised I had to look at the phone to see the caller’s details. Indeed it was Mercedes, my older sister, who had started to go by Mercy when she was a teenager and tired of being teased about her automotive name.

Fortunately I was home by then, and I pulled up in front of my apartment building. “Hi,” I said. “Wow. How are you?”

“I’m good. I was thinking about mom today.”

“Why?”

“You don’t remember? This is the anniversary of her death.”

“Oh.”

My mom had died when I was nineteen, and I was too busy trying to make my own life to grieve too much for her. She had done her best in difficult circumstances, though. “I realized that I hadn’t talked to you in a while, so I decided to call. I hope it’s all right.”

“I love you, *hermana*,” I said, using the Spanish word for sister. Our mother had tried to get us to speak Spanish in the house but we’d resisted. Mercy and Grace were American names and we were American girls, and

even though she insisted Puerto Rico was part of the States, we didn't want to be marked as "other."

"I love you, too. I'm sorry we haven't spoken more often. Tell me what's going on in your life."

I got out of the car, and talked as I walked into my apartment. I told her about my training jobs and working at the pet store. "As soon as I can get a place that takes dogs, I want to get one of my own," I said.

"Remember Buddy?" she asked. "That mutt Dad picked up for you?"

"Of course. He was the one who set me on this path."

She told me about her job, working at a big-box retailer. She had divorced her first husband and married a second, but things weren't working out. "I have to break this pattern," she said. "I'm not going to keep marrying Dad."

"I don't want that either," I said. We talked for a while longer, and gradually the easiness came back between us, the way we had been when we were girls. I still resented her for escaping, leaving me with mom and her many problems, but I thought I could get over that.

"Let's keep in touch," I said finally. "We're the only family we have." She agreed, and we ended the call. I hadn't realized that Mercy had fallen into the same pattern I had, choosing guys with problems in the hope that we could fix them, the way we couldn't fix our father. An interesting revelation, certainly.



9: ROLE PLAY: ALEX

Usually I had to leave an extra hour for my drive to the VA hospital, where I met with my therapist, D'eriq. A normal person might only take a half-hour or forty-five minutes to get there, but I had to leave time for pulling over and closing my eyes if the traffic got to be too much for me. Add in that I couldn't take the highway, which was way too stressful.

Scout wasn't happy to get into the car. I guess maybe he was worried that I was taking him back to the animal shelter. I had to spend fifteen minutes just walking him around the car, first with the doors closed, then open, before he would even consent to sniff the lintel.

By the time I got him into the passenger seat, we were running late. We were on Hollywood Boulevard heading west when a low-slung BMW with fat tires raced past me. I got a quick adrenaline boost and normally I'd have pulled over to let the energy wash over me, but I looked at Scout beside me, his eyes on me and his tongue hanging out, and I kept going.

I decided to try an experiment. I turned south on State Road 7, a busy road that I usually avoided unless absolutely necessary. I was sandwiched between a concrete mixer and a car carrier, but instead of feeling boxed in and looking for a way to change lanes, I stayed where I was, sticking my right hand out to pet Scout.

Even when an ambulance siren sounded in the distance, and I had to slow down and change lanes to let it pass, the noise didn't set me off the way it might have in the past.

I was surprised when we arrived at the VA early. I parked in the water tower lot and made sure that Scout's service dog in training vest was secure around his thickening coat of gold fur, and we went for a walk around the grounds to kill time before my appointment.

The only trees were around a pretty, coral-roofed building, so we dawdled our way around it, despite the busy streets that were close. Nobody questioned Scout's presence. My military bearing and his vest were enough. We even passed two other guys with service dogs as we made our way to D'eriq's building.

D'eriq was a vet himself, who had gotten a degree as a clinical social worker. As soon as the receptionist called him, he came out to the lobby to meet us. He was African-American, with ebony skin and a high-and-tight haircut—dyed blond. I introduced him to Scout.

He leaned down to let the dog sniff his hand. "Handsome boy."

"Smart, too." I held my hand out, palm down. "Scout, sit." He sat. Then I lowered it and said, "Scout, down." He obeyed.

"I'm impressed," D'eriq said. "Come on back and let's talk about how he's helping you."

D'eriq's office was standard government issue drab, but he had livened it up with lots of inspirational posters, colorful photos of his travels, and a rainbow sticker announcing it was a "safe zone" where vets could talk about anything.

"Are you sleeping better?" D'eriq asked after we sat down.

"I think so. Still not much at night—mostly I work and then after I feed Scout and take him out for a walk I crash for a couple of hours."

He opened my case file on his computer and began to type.

“Nightmares?”

“A few. But when I wake up I reach over for Scout and he calms me down.”

“Good. How about your reactions? Loud noises and unexpected movements have triggered your PTSD in the past.”

“Well, not making as much progress there,” I said. I told him about the guy who had reached out to touch me at the traffic light. “I over-reacted, I know. I have to work on that.”

“How is Scout when you get upset?” D’eriq asked as sat back.

“He’s good. He helped me with your homework assignment.” I told him about going to Java Boys and making contact with Akimbo, and how gradually we’d begun having real conversations. “And I even made two new friends.”

“Really? That’s great.” He looked down at my file. “Tell me about these new friends.”

I told him about Kenny and Cheyenne, and we laughed about the wild dog’s antics. “And then there’s Grace,” I said.

“Nice name.”

“She’s a dog trainer, and she’s been helping me with Scout. We take a class with her on Saturday mornings.”

He raised an eyebrow. “That’s all? What does she look like?”

“Very pretty, athletic, tanned. Blonde hair usually in a ponytail.” I paused. “She sweet, and patient,” I said. “We’ve gone out for coffee. But I’ve got a long way to go before I start to date anyone.”

“She may have a different opinion of that,” D’eriq said. “I think you should leave yourself open to whatever happens. If she’s a dog person she won’t mind if Scout comes along, and you’ve already seen how much he can calm you down.”

I shifted in my chair. “I don’t know. There’s definitely a vibe between us, but I’m afraid to get too close to anyone.”

“Have you told her about your PTSD?” D’eriq asked.

“Just in general terms. What am I going to say? I’m damaged goods, stay away from me?”

“Just because you’re damaged doesn’t mean you can’t be repaired,” D’eriq said. “That’s why you’re coming to see me, right? Because you want to get better. You have to find a way to communicate that information to this young woman, ask her to be patient with you.”

“I suppose.”

“Let’s do some role play. I’m Grace, and I ask what happened to you in Afghanistan. What’s the source of your PTSD?”

“You know that already, D’eriq.”

He shook his head. “I’m not D’eriq, I’m Grace. Talk to me.” I reached down to stroke Scout’s head. The fur over his skull was so soft it was like velvet.

“It’s hard to pinpoint one event,” I said finally. “It’s more the cumulative effect of what I saw.”

“Yes?”

“I mean, the biggest thing, the one that haunts me, is when our Humvee was attacked by a rocket and a friend of mine was killed,” I said.

I decided that if I was talking to Grace, I wasn't going to go into gory details. "My job was to build things to protect other soldiers, so we'd often get out ahead of the troops to survey the landscape and look for problems."

I closed my eyes and let myself return to the desert. It was so hot we were always sweating and then getting dehydrated. A cold bottle of water was a treat, whether I drank it or dumped it on my head.

"I remember we were traveling on this road, and it curved, and a mountain, really more like a big hill, rose up to our right. There was an old house up there, and we realized that the Ali Babas could use it to ambush troops on the road. We jumped out of our transport in full battle rattle and began to head up the hill."

"What's battle rattle?" he asked, though I knew he was aware of the term. Grace probably wasn't.

"Flak vest, Kevlar helmet, gas mask, ammunition, weapons, and a soft vest that covers the torso, shoulders and back. It has ceramic plates that fit in pockets in the front and back of the vest. These plates protect the heart and lungs. If you see a TV news report, you see guys wearing battle rattle."

"Wow. That all must be heavy."

"It's about fifty pounds," I said. "We began to head up the hill, rifles drawn. We didn't know if anybody was living up there, or if it was deserted."

"I can see that would be scary," D'eriq said.

"It was. My blood was racing but I stayed in formation. We got up there, and discovered that the house was empty. The whole back wall had been blown out, probably by the Ali Babas. There were still pieces of furniture inside, a couple of kids' toys. I wondered what had happened to the people who lived there."

“What did you do then?”

“We set demolition bombs to clear the area. Then we hustled back to the APC—the armored personnel carrier—and detonated the bombs. They were strong enough to destroy a big chunk of the hillside, too. We leveled it off so no one could hide up there.” Adrenaline was rushing through my veins as I described the scene, but having Scout beside me kept me from getting too deep in my head. Even so, I looked at D’eriq and said, “That’s all I can say.”

“That’s good. That’s more than you’ve told me in the past about what you experienced, and you did it without freaking out.”

After we left D’eriq’s office, I walked Scout around the trees again. I saw another veteran with a prosthetic leg and a real service dog, and I was tempted to stop him and ask for advice, but I didn’t want to bother him.

I thought about my conversation with D’eriq as Scout and I drove back to Hollywood. Grace hadn’t blinked when I told her I had some PTSD. Was it worth trying to get to know her better, see how she responded if she saw how damaged I was?



10: FREAK OUT: GRACE

By the time of the third obedience class on Saturday morning, the two gay guys with the Papillon had dropped out, and I was down to Alex and Scout, Kenny and Cheyenne, and the two nurses and their dogs.

That was good—I'd have more time to work individually with each pair. But it seemed like Cheyenne had forgotten everything he had learned the past week. He was wild and couldn't settle down.

I had to pull Kenny aside and tell him that if he couldn't keep Cheyenne under control, he'd have to drop out of the class. "I want to be honest with you. I don't think it's Cheyenne's fault that he's so lively and distracting the other dogs. You need to take more time with him and get him to recognize you're in charge. A trainer can't establish that relationship—you're the only one who can."

I hated to kick Cheyenne out of the class because I believe every dog deserves to be trained, but he was getting in the way of helping the other pairs and Kenny wasn't doing his part.

Alex left Scout sitting on the floor and came over to where Kenny and I were talking. "Give me his lead, Kenny," Alex said. Kenny did. And the transformation in Cheyenne's behavior was surprising. At Alex's command, he sat on his haunches, looking up. Alex gave him a tiny treat and praised him. Then he looked at me. "See, Cheyenne can be trained. If you let them stay in the class I'll keep working with them during the week."

"If you say so," I said. I had Alex and Kenny pair up for all the training, and Cheyenne was much better behaved. It was clear to me that the dog was

responding to Alex rather than Kenny, though.

“Alex, will you stay behind for a minute?” I asked, when we were finished.

“Sure.” He turned to Kenny. “I’ll come over tomorrow afternoon, all right?”

“You’re a real pal,” Kenny said. “Come on, Cheyenne.”

“That’s not the right command,” Alex said.

“Right.” Kenny deepened his voice to match Alex’s tone and said, “Cheyenne, heel.” And wouldn’t you know, the dog obeyed. Kenny had a wide smile as he walked out.

“He’s got to learn to listen to Kenny, not you,” I said to Alex after they were gone. “Unless you two are going to be, you know, a couple. Not that there’s anything bad with that.”

“No chance of that,” Alex said. “We, uh, have different orientations. But did you hear how he imitated my voice to get Cheyenne to behave? He just has to be more macho, show Cheyenne that he’s in charge.”

“I don’t think macho is in Kenny’s vocabulary,” Grace said, and we both laughed.

Alex hesitated, and I worried I might have offended him by suggesting he and Kenny could be a couple. Instead he said, “Would you like to have dinner sometime?”

I felt a little zing. Becca was right, I did like Alex and thought he was handsome and sexy. “That would be fun,” I said. “Are you busy tonight?”

“I can clear my schedule,” he said with a smile. “All right if Scout comes along?”

“Sure. Since they redid the paving downtown there are a couple of good restaurants that have sidewalk dining. It’ll be good practice for Scout to stay focused on you.”

We agreed to meet at a Chinese restaurant called Helen Huang’s at seven. He walked out smiling, which was how I felt, too.

I wasn’t sure what to wear that night. Alex had come to class in cut-off jeans and T-shirts, but I was sure he’d wear something nicer for a date, and I wanted to match him. I finally chose a pink polo shirt and navy capris, with strappy pink sandals with a high heel.

He was waiting at the restaurant with Scout by his side as I approached, and he looked good enough to eat. He wore a polo shirt, too, and his accented muscles I hadn’t realized he had. Tight jeans, too, and I was eager to see him turn around. I like a bubble butt on a guy, and I hoped he had one. It was kind of awkward when I reached him, neither of us sure whether to shake hands or bump elbows or what. I finally just smiled and said, “You look nice.”

“You look better than nice,” he said. “Very pretty.” The restaurant owner, a round-faced older woman, came out to seat us, and without asking brought a bowl of water for Scout. He immediately stuck his head down and slurped, and when he lifted it he dripped water over the pavement.

After we ordered, I asked Alex, “Did you have a dog as a kid?”

“We did. A poodle. But he was really my mother’s dog more than mine, because she was the one who was home all day to feed and walk him. I played with him, and I took him on walks a lot during vacations and summers, though.”

Alex picked up his Tsingtao and sipped. “We used to go to a lake near the house to swim, and I remember once I was on the shore with Milo, and my

mother was on a raft about ten feet out. Milo pulled the lead out of my hand and jumped in the water and dog paddled out to her. That made it really clear who he loved.”

I laughed. “I have a similar story. My sister Mercy was jealous that Buddy was so attached to me, so she’d pick him up and take him into her room with her and close the door. She’d try to play with him but all he wanted to do was scratch at the door to get let out and find me.”

“It’s funny how dogs bond to people,” Alex said. “From the time I picked up Scout at the shelter, I felt this magnetic connection to him.”

“What made you decide to get him?”

Alex shrugged. “My PTSD,” he said. “I was getting fed up with not being able to sleep, with startling at every noise. I was taking all kinds of pills and they weren’t working.”

“And you decided a dog would help?”

Alex shrugged. “I figured it was worth a try.”

He was getting uncomfortable, so I decided to shift the topic. “You must have traveled in the Army. What was your favorite place?”

“I didn’t get to many places. Once to France for a bicycle trip. I flew through Germany a couple of times, but we didn’t have time to go sightseeing. How about you? Have you traveled?”

“My mom took Mercy and me to Puerto Rico once to see her family. And I went to the Bahamas once with my friend Becca. She won a package deal from a contest she entered. It was great—the resort was beautiful and we sat around the pool sipping pina coladas and then going swimming to cool off. At night we went to a club that played reggae music and we danced.” I smiled. “I guess it was a lot like a staycation here only with more alcohol.”

“Do you want to travel?” he asked.

“I guess. I mean, I see peoples’ vacation photos and think oh, that looks cool. But right now I’m holding it together with my training and working at the pet store, and I don’t have a lot of spare cash for travel. I’m also thinking I might go back to school.”

“Really? For what?”

“I’ve been enjoying working with you and Scout, and there’s a lot that I can learn. So I might get a certificate in training therapy dogs.”

He laughed. “Well, I’m glad that my trouble is at least good for something.”

It was easy to talk to him, and he insisted on paying the check and walking me home. “This was really nice, Alex,” I said. Then I leaned down and scratched under Scout’s chin. “Nice to see you, too, Scout.”

“I’m glad you had a good time,” Alex said. “I did, too.”

It was very comfortable, and I was about to put my hand in his when suddenly some idiot a block away decided to set off some cherry bombs. The noise surprised me—and then before I knew it I was on the ground and Alex was on top of me, panting heavily.

“What the…” I said. All I could think of was my dad throwing my mom to the ground in one of his fits of anger, and the adrenaline rush was giving me a headache. Scout began licking my face as Alex pulled off me.

“Sorry, inappropriate reaction,” he said. “I thought those were real bombs. I was trying to protect you.”

He reached down to help me up but I wouldn’t take his hand. My pink capris were stained with dirt and my elbow was scraped.

“I’m really, really sorry,” he said.

“I have to get home,” I said. I hurried off, wobbling on my heels, but I didn’t care.



11: ALL ON ME: ALEX

I couldn't believe I had screwed up so royally with Grace. She had to think I was both a nutcase and a brute, throwing her to the ground like that.

I stood there with Scout for a minute, watching her hurry away from me as fast as she could on those high heels. Scout nuzzled my hand, and I stroked his back. A few of the fine golden hairs came off and I knew I'd have to brush him soon.

How could I be so screwed up? Would every step forward I took send me careening back into the trauma I couldn't seem to leave behind? My head started to throb, and I knew I had to get home and take some pills.

Fortunately Scout knew the way and all I had to do was follow him. After I got home and took the pills, I sent a quick text to Grace. "Sorry about tonight. Don't worry, I won't come back to the class."

I tried to sleep, but the nightmares wouldn't let me. As soon as I'd drift off, I'd be back in Afghanistan, watching my friends get blown apart, then wake up drenched in sweat.

Scout whimpered and licked my face but having him beside me wasn't enough. I'd been stupid to think a dog could solve my problems. I should return Scout to the shelter, where he'd be adopted by someone who could love him and not depend on him as much as I did.

The sun finally rose, and Scout needed to go out. I still had responsibilities toward him, for as long as I kept him with me. I took him for a walk, and it was like the sunshine and palm trees were mocking me.

This is the life you could have, they said. If you weren't so damaged. I sat down on a bench and cried. Scout sat beside me, tried to lick my hands, but I ignored him. A family on their way to church passed me and stared, but I didn't care.

When I'd finally emptied myself, I let Scout take me back home. When I got there, I checked my phone and found a text from Kenny, asking what time I'd be able to help him with training Cheyenne.

I thought it was silly that a grown man would write 'cn u cm ovr' as if he was a little kid just learning his abcs. But he added a plea that he had to get Cheyenne in shape before the next class, and to be honest, I felt worse for the dog than for the man. I had to do what I could for him.

I called him and we arranged that I'd come over to his place that afternoon and we could work with both dogs on obedience training. I didn't need to do anything more with Scout because I'd probably be returning him to the shelter on Monday, but at least he'd help with Cheyenne.

I worked for a couple of hours on customer calls, with Scout curled on the floor beside me. Then I went to the gym, nodded a hello to Frank at the front desk, and started to build a new routine. I worked out for nearly an hour, building up a sweat, and then went home to shower.

That afternoon, I knew Kenny wouldn't be prepared, so I nuked a bunch of hot dog chunks and put them in a plastic bag. As Scout and I walked to Kenny's place, I was struck, as I often was, at how Hollywood was in the middle of a transition. Empty lots were salted between new condo buildings. The streets were developing a real downtown feel as new retail shops opened at ground level.

Scout and I managed to make it to Kenny's building without my having to attack anyone. I found his door and knocked, and Kenny came out with Cheyenne on a lead, which he let go as soon as Cheyenne spotted Scout and pulled. I kept a hand on Scout's lead as the dogs romped together in the driveway. "Let's see what kind of progress you and Cheyenne have made," I said. "Have you been practicing?"

"I figured he was doing okay so mostly we played," Kenny said. "I want him to be my friend. He doesn't have to be so perfect."

I shook my head. "He's never going to be your friend. He's your dog. You can spoil him and give him treats and belly rubs, but at the end of the day he has to know that you're in charge. Training does that."

"He doesn't have to be a service dog," Kenny said. "It's not like he has to keep me from going crazy. Just keep me from being lonely."

"You know what? You and I have different ideas about dogs. And probably everything else. I don't think this is going to work."

"Hold on," Kenny pleaded. "Please, stay? Let the dogs play, and then we'll work on that training again. I need to be able to go back to Grace's class."

"You can't short-circuit this," I said. "Training your dog is work."

"I know all about work," Kenny said. "Believe me, I do enough of it." He had that hangdog expression on his face again, and against my better judgment I relented.

After the dogs had played for a few minutes, I suggested we practice walking. "This is what I've been doing with Scout." I put him on his lead and said, "Let's go."

He walked about a foot with me, then strained to go forward. “Stop.” I tugged on his lead. “Sit.” He plopped his butt on the ground.

“See? That’s the way to keep him from pulling. You try.” As soon as Kenny had Cheyenne on the lead, he tugged forward so hard he nearly knocked Kenny over. “Give him the command to stop,” I said. “Then sit.”

Cheyenne was wild for the first circuit around Kenny’s complex, but having Scout there got him settled, and on the second trip he was walking much better, well enough to get Grace’s stamp of approval. It took a lot of pulling and stopping and starting, but by the time we made it back to Kenny’s building Scout was walking like a champ and Cheyenne had begun to obey. Or maybe he was just tired. I know I was.

“Do you think they recognize that they’re brothers?” Kenny asked, as we turned for a third circuit. “I read on Perez Hilton that he thinks dogs do.”

“No idea,” I said. “But these guys were together for longer than average, and then it’s only been a month or so since they were separated. So for sure they recognize each other. Whether they know they’re brothers or not is beyond me.”

“Thanks for this,” Kenny said. “I really appreciate it. You want to come in for a beer or something?”

I hesitated. But hey, it wasn’t like he was asking to go to an indoor restaurant, where I might be hemmed in by other diners. I’d tried that once, soon after coming home, and my blood pressure skyrocketed and I had to rush away from the out-of-town friend who’d gone with me.

“Sure,” I said. He opened the door of his townhouse and walked inside. Scout and I stayed on the doorstep for a minute, until Cheyenne barked and

Scout tugged forward. I can do this, I thought. I can walk into this guy's house and not freak out.

I stayed in the foyer for a minute, getting my bearings. I liked what Kenny had done in his living room, mounting architectural artifacts on the walls. That carved mantelpiece, I thought, had to have come out of an old house. Decorative tiles and small wooden pieces that looked like they belonged on staircases dotted the walls. He brought me a cold bottle and I held it up. "Raspberry beer?" I asked.

"I like the fruity stuff," he said. "Go figure." He smiled. "I hope it's okay. I can't stand cheap beer."

"And I usually can't afford anything but cheap beer," I said. "This'll be a treat." I thumbed the cap off and took a swig. It tasted sweet and a bit sharp, and I could feel the raspberry against my tongue. "I like it."

"Have you always had dogs?" Kenny asked as we drank our beer. "You're so good with Scout."

I told him about Milo. Then I remembered I was supposed to ask him the same thing. "Sorry, I lost a lot of manners when I was in the Army," I said. "How about you? Did you have a dog?"

He shook his head. "I wanted one, but my mom was allergic and she said no. I think it was more like she knew she'd get stuck taking care of it."

He drank some of his beer, then said, "So, you were in the Army." I tensed up immediately. I couldn't talk about where I'd served and what I'd done without getting anxious, but Kenny didn't go where I thought he was going to. "Did you go anywhere fun? Like on R&R?"

I felt myself relaxing. R&R I could talk about. I'd already been able to open up to Grace. "A buddy and I rented bicycles and went through the Loire

Valley in France,” I said. Just the memory of that trip was calming.

“Really? I can’t see you interested in all those castles.”

“Why not?”

“You’re too tough for French provincial. I saw you look around when you came in here. You were thinking uber-gay, right? Too fancy?”

I shook my head. “Not at all. I like the stuff you’ve salvaged.” I pointed at the mantle and the tiles.

“The mantelpiece came from my nonna’s house in New Jersey,” he said. “I have a stained-glass window upstairs that came from there, too. I bought the tiles at a salvage shop in New Orleans when I went for Mardi Gras one year.”

Just the thought of all those people crowding the streets of New Orleans was enough to make me shudder. “I know, Mardi Gras,” Kenny said. “Uber-gay again.”

“I’m not prejudiced,” I said. “I know it’s a cliché, but I knew guys in the Army who were gay and I got along fine with them. Even considered some of them my friends.”

“What about Grace?” he asked. “Considering her as a friend? Or something more? I may be gay as a box of Froot Loops but I can tell when a girl is interested in a guy.”

I shook my head. “We had dinner last night, and I totally messed up.”

“What? You tried to put the moves on her too quickly?”

“Nope. I knocked her to the pavement and then fell on top of her.”

His eyes opened wide. “Deliberately?”

“I thought I heard bombs going off, and I wanted to protect her. My doctor says I have PTSD. You know what that is?”

“Of course. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. My cousin was in the first Gulf War and when he came back he couldn’t get his head together and he ended up killing himself.” He caught himself. “Oh god I didn’t mean to say that,” he said in a rush. “I’m sure you’re totally different.”

If only he knew. I wasn’t that different. “I tend to freak out in crowds and I have trouble sleeping at night because I have bad dreams. That’s why I got Scout—I hope that having him around will calm me down.”

“Is it working?”

“When he’s with me, I don’t feel so stressed. I can even manage to sleep a few hours at night, too.” I sighed. “Dinner with Grace last night was my first attempt at dating in years,” I said. “Big disaster. I know I freaked her out. I texted her afterward that I was sorry and I was going to drop out of the class.”

“Maybe we can find a different class to take together,” he said. “I totally get that she might not want to see you again after what you did, even if it was with the best intentions.”

“I don’t know that I’m going to keep Scout,” I said. “I have so many problems, and it’s too much to expect a dog to heal me.”

“That’s what dogs do,” Kenny said. “You know what dog spelled backwards is?”

I thought for a second. “God?”

“Exactly. Cheyenne’s crazy, I’m the first to admit, but he’s been good for me. I tend to be kind of scatterbrained, you know, and having him around has forced me to pay attention to him. To feed him and walk him.” He paused.

“And I was lonely, because I had a boyfriend for a long time and he dumped me a while ago.”

“Sorry to hear that. Did he give you a reason?”

“He was a real type-A kind of guy. Always on a schedule, multi-tasking, pushing his career, working out. Eventually he said he didn’t have time for me dithering around.”

“They say opposites attract,” I said. “But you both have to be willing to change, and move toward some center. It sounds like he wasn’t willing to do that.”

“Or that I couldn’t,” Kenny said. “I mean, I tried. I let him decide where we should eat and when we should have sex because I knew it bothered him that I couldn’t make up my mind.”

“And did he make any concessions for you?”

“He said everything he did was for me. But it wasn’t true. It was all for him, with a thin covering. Like he knew I wouldn’t get around to working out, so he pressured me to go with him. Said it was all about me, but it wasn’t.”

He looked at me. “I think you should give Grace some time to get over the surprise you sprung on her last night, and then see what she says.”

I drained the last of my beer. “I should get going,” I said. “I have to get to work later.”

“Thanks for coming over,” Kenny said. “It’s nice to know that Cheyenne and I both have friends.”

I thought about what Kenny had said as I walked home. We had become friends, because of the dogs. I’d lost touch with most of the guys I knew in

the Army—either they were still serving, and in remote locations, or they'd come back to their families and were busy with them.

When I got back home, I sat on the floor with Scout. He rested his head on my leg and I began to brush his golden fur. “What am I going to do, boy?” I asked. “Should I keep you? Kenny seems to think you and I have bonded and that we're good for each other. But I'm not sure.”

The fur came off in big soft clumps, and I started stacking it in a plastic grocery bag. “You deserve the chance to have fun, playing with a family and with other dogs,” I said, as I kept brushing him. “I don't know that I can ever give you a life like that.”

He looked up at me, and his big brown pupils took up almost all the space in his eye socket. There was so much love in that gaze and I knew that I couldn't give him away. It might not be fair to him, but I loved him and I needed him, and I didn't have so much love in my life that I could afford to give up on some of it.

Eventually I got all the loose hair off Scout. “There's enough here for another dog,” I said. “But you're enough for me.” I logged onto the computer and handled calls for a few hours, then worked on the dollhouse until I could fall asleep.

The rest of the week, I followed my regular pattern—walking Scout, training him, working online, going to the gym, building the dollhouse. But for the first time I felt like there was something missing in my life. A woman. Was that woman Grace de Windt? I didn't know. But I felt more comfortable with her than with any other woman I'd met so far in Florida. Was that because I kept myself so closed off? Or was it just that we had Scout between us? In any event, that was over.



12: INTERRUPTION: GRACE

I was still upset when I got home and called Becca. “The evening was going so well,” I said. “But then he freaked out on me.” I described hearing the cherry bombs and how Alex had reacted. “I know what he was trying to do, but it reminded me of my father knocking my mother around and I couldn’t handle it.”

“It sounds like it’s as much your problem as his,” Becca said.

“Excuse me? Are you making excuses for a guy throwing me to the ground?”

“He told you he did it because he was trying to protect you. Not to hurt you.”

“I don’t know. It reminds me too much of my parents. The first time my father sprained my mother’s wrist, it was because he grabbed her and nearly dragged her away from a man she was talking to at church. My father said he saw something evil in the man’s eye and he had to protect her.”

“What did your mother say?”

“At first she said the man was just speaking to her in Spanish about something happening in Puerto Rico. But eventually she said she was wrong to talk to him.”

“This doesn’t seem like the same thing,” Becca said.

I looked down at my wrist, which had been scraped up on the pavement. “Whether he was trying to protect me or not, he hurt me. Alex has red

warning lights flashing all over him. You were right. I keep trying to find guys I can fix. Only I can't fix him.”

I thought about my conversations with Dr. Altman. She had been more concerned about fixing myself rather than other people. But it was all the same, wasn't it?

I wasn't surprised when I got the apologetic text from Alex the next morning. That's what abusers do—they hurt you, then they apologize. Oh, baby, I didn't mean it. Give me another chance.

Only Alex didn't ask for another date. He said he was dropping out of the class.

I put down my phone after reading his message. I wasn't sure how I felt about that. I admit I was crushing on Scout almost as much as I was on Alex. He was such a handsome dog, with such a sweet personality, warm and loving and yet clearly protective of Alex.

Alex needed help with his dog, and maybe down the road Scout could help him with his PTSD. There wasn't any reason why he couldn't come to class anymore, as long as I kept my distance from him. And there were no loud noises to set him off.

I thought about Alex and Scout off and on during the week. I understood what he'd done, really. But it had still scared the shit out of me. Did I want to see him again? I met Becca for dinner on Wednesday night, and she brought Navajo, who she said was suffering from separation anxiety. She kept the dachshund in a bag over her shoulder, and every now and then he'd poke his long brown snout out and sniff the air.

“I can't figure out what to do about Alex,” I said, after we'd ordered drinks. “Suppose he comes back to the class, and whenever I look at him I

see my father and remember what he did. That would be awful.”

“Does he look anything like your father?”

“Not at all. My dad was shorter and blond and nowhere near as muscular as Alex.”

“Then why would you think of him when you see Alex? Just because of that one incident?”

“I don’t know. But what if I can’t talk to him? That would be even more hurtful to him than letting him go.”

The server brought us bread and butter, and Becca broke a piece off and fed it to Navajo. “This guy means more to you than just a training client,” she said. “I can tell. You haven’t gotten this torn up about a guy for ages. I think you should give him another chance. At least text him and say that you think you can help his dog, and he should keep coming to the class.”

“What if he doesn’t want to?”

Becca stroked Navajo’s head. “Then the decision is made, right? You reached out to someone who’s hurting. I know that kind of thing matters to you. If he doesn’t reach back, it’s off your plate.”

The server delivered our food, and I said, “How long has Navajo been getting anxious when you leave?”

“I’ve been away from home more because of all these meetings I have to attend at school, now that I’m in line for a full-time job. When I come home I find he’s torn something up.”

“What do you do when you leave?”

“I tell both dogs that they’re good boys and I love them and tell them to behave.”

“I wouldn’t make a big deal out of leaving,” I said. “That alerts them that something might be wrong. Instead, I’d take that ball you put the treats in and give it to Navajo a few minutes before you leave. Make sure he’s obsessed with it and then slip out.”

“I’ll try that tomorrow. I’m going to be gone all afternoon.”

We ate and I pretended not to notice when Becca slipped a couple of bites to Navajo. One problem at a time.

Which brought me back to Alex, as I was on my way home from the restaurant, and by the time I got back I had made up my mind.

“I want to help Scout help you,” I texted to him. “Come back to the class on Saturday if you want.”

Then I waited. He’d said his sleep and work schedules were erratic because of his nightmares. But almost immediately he texted back, “Are you sure?”

I sent him a thumbs-up, and he responded with the same icon.

Over the next two days, I did some more research on therapy dogs. I’d already established the basics. His mix of golden retriever and collie made Scout a good match as a service dog, and he had developed a bond with Alex and was able to understand and carry out basic commands easily.

I found three advanced steps we could take to help Scout help Alex. Scout already was aware of Alex’s emotional state, so he could easily be trained to handle interruption tasks. If he sensed Alex getting stressed out about something he saw, heard or dreamed, he could interrupt Alex with licking, kissing, and whimpering. That would help Alex shift his awareness from his issue to pay attention to Scout.

The other two were going to be tougher. Guide tasks were useful if Alex got in trouble somewhere, and Scout needed to lead him away from the problem. I wasn't sure how to train Scout for that without simulating problems for Alex.

The final was called deep pressure therapy. When a therapist applies mild but consistent pressure on the torso, the brain responds by releasing hormones that create a feeling of calmness and peace. That was why people felt so relaxed after getting a massage.

Scout could simulate that by climbing up to lay his body on Alex's. But again, I wasn't sure how I could train a dog for that. My focus had always been on behaviors, and human-dog interaction. I could help humans reduce anxiety in their dogs, train them to take their business outdoors, help them become better partners. But this kind of therapy might be beyond me to teach.

Saturday morning I was nervous, moving around my apartment unable to concentrate on anything. I wasn't frightened of Alex—I knew he hadn't intended to hurt me. But I was worried that I wouldn't be able to help him and Scout in the way that they needed.

At least I had Kenny and Cheyenne and the two nurses and their dogs at the training. Alex and I greeted each other awkwardly, and then we jumped into a quick review of the commands we'd gone over. Scout and the pit bull mix did the best, with the poodle coming in a close third. Of course Cheyenne appeared to have forgotten everything he'd learned.

I was interested to see that Alex didn't jump up to take over Cheyenne's lead. Good. Kenny had to learn how to control the dog. It took a few minutes, but he began channeling patience and Cheyenne responded to that.

Then we moved on to teaching the stay command. The two nurses paired up to work with their dogs. It was funny that the pit bull mix had trouble leaving his mom behind, no matter how she tried. The poodle performed well, but poodles are like that. They're not as clingy as some dogs.

"Alex and Kenny, you're next," I said.

"I'll go," Kenny said. "I tried this at home with Cheyenne. I have to get down to his level to make it work, though." We all started to laugh as Kenny waddled backward from a squat, issuing Cheyenne the stay command repeatedly.

He got three feet away before he said, "Cheyenne, come!" and the dog joyously romped over to him, to be reward with a treat and lots of head rubs.

"Now you've got to do it while standing up," I said.

While Alex kept hold of Cheyenne's collar, he said, "Give the stay command."

"Cheyenne, stay," Kenny said.

Cheyenne strained to rush toward his daddy, and I shook my head. "Say it like you mean it. You're his pack leader. He has to do what you tell him to."

It was comical to see Kenny butch it up, squaring his shoulders and narrowing his eyes at the dog. "Cheyenne. Stay!"

Alex let go of Cheyenne's collar and he didn't move.

"Good boy, Cheyenne," Kenny said.

"Now kneel down to his level and give him the come command," I said. Kenny did as instructed, and Cheyenne romped over to him, his toenails clicking on the concrete floor.

“Good boy,” he said, and he buried his head in the puppy’s fur. “You’re daddy’s sweetheart!”

“Now reverse,” I said. Kenny and Alex practiced with the dogs, praising them lavishly when they obeyed. Alex and Scout weren’t perfect at first, but Scout picked up quickly.

“You’re all doing great,” I said when they were finished. “Next week we’ll focus on a few other things like getting a dog to stop barking, and keeping a dog from jumping up on you.”

“I can use that,” Kenny said, and everyone laughed.

I took a deep breath and said, “Alex, can I talk to you for a minute?” I almost laughed when I saw his face, because he looked like a dog who knows he has misbehaved and is ready to be yelled at.

“I did some research on additional training I can give Scout to be your service dog,” I said. “Do you have a few minutes to hang around?”

He was surprised, but he said, “Yeah. What other things?”

“I want to start with interruption tasks,” I said. “This might be hard for you, though.”

He squared his shoulders. “I can manage whatever you need.”

“Good. I want you to close your eyes and remember Afghanistan.”

“Really?”

“Yup. Start with something good. What did you like about the country?”

He laughed and said, “Not much,” but he closed his eyes.

“Tell me what you’re seeing.”

“Kids playing by the side of the road,” he said. “The kids were always so friendly.” He smiled. Scout sat on his haunches beside Alex, keeping his eyes

on his dad. Even in the few weeks I'd known him, he was growing by leaps and bounds.

"Keep going," I said. "What else?"

"An old lady is handing me a piece of melon. I swear, I've never tasted sweeter melons in my life."

"Open your eyes."

He did. "I think that's the first time I've had good memories of Afghanistan since I came home," he said. "But how does that help Scout? Was he supposed to interrupt me?"

"Only when you have bad memories," I said. "Close your eyes again."

Once they were closed I asked him to remember a day that went bad. He pursed his lips. "We were on our way to Kandahar in a convoy. I was sitting in the back of the truck watching the road behind us."

"Don't just tell me about it. Remember it." Suddenly he started to shake, and I looked at Scout. I didn't have to speak, I just pointed at Alex, and Scout nosed him. When he didn't stop shaking immediately, Scout put his paw on Alex's leg, and suddenly Alex's eyes snapped open.

"That's intervention," I said. "Scout is a natural. He directed your attention away from your nightmare."

"He's done that a few times, without training." Alex leaned down and rubbed Scout's head. "We're on the same wavelength that way."

"Good. But just because a dog does something correct once or twice doesn't mean the behavior has been ingrained in him. I want you to practice that with him a couple of times a day during the next week."

"You want me to deliberately make myself crazy?"

“You have a therapist at the VA, don’t you?”

When Alex nodded I said, “Has he said anything about how you can control those flashbacks?”

“He said the more I recognize what they are, the better I can control them.”

“This will be part of that. If you deliberately call up a bad memory, you start to take away its power.”

He looked at me. “Do you do that yourself?”

I nodded. “Sometimes when I’m feeling bad I dredge up memories of my dad hitting my mom. The more I do it, the less power those memories have.” I held up my hand. “I need to remind you I’m not a therapist. This is based on my own experience. Don’t do anything that puts you or anyone else in danger.”

“That’s what D’eriq says,” Alex said. “My therapist.” He smiled. “It feels good to know that I’ve got someone else on my team who wants to help me.” That’s all it was going to be, I reminded myself. Helping Alex and Scout learn to work together.



13: GUIDE: ALEX

As Scout and I walked back home after the training, I thought about what Grace said. Had my bad memories gotten better at all? Or was I just tormenting myself?

I remembered something D’eriq had said, about control. When I decided to bring up a memory, I had control of it. I knew that what happened remained in the past, that I had survived and gotten home. It was only when those memories hit me without notice that I couldn’t control them.

We came to a pocket park, and I decided to try an experiment. I sat on the ground with Scout, stroking his golden fur and emptying my mind of anything. I waited for something in the environment to trigger me. With traffic passing all the time, I had a feeling it wouldn’t take too long.

It was very nice there in the sunshine with my dog, just relaxing, until a truck hit a bump in the road and the noise shattered me. Suddenly I was back in Afghanistan, on that road to Kandahar, and I knew there was a bomb ahead but I couldn’t do anything about it.

And then Scout was there in my dream with me, and I worried he’d get blown up. But he kept nuzzling me, licking my chin, and I couldn’t help laughing. That’s when my eyes snapped open.

I stayed there on the grass with Scout, scratching his tummy until my pulse rate came back to normal. I hadn’t realized he had nipples there—at least six of them. I’d have to ask Grace about that.

A car passed by with a license plate frame in Spanish: “*La fe mueve montañas.*” Faith moves mountains. Did I need to have faith in Scout’s love,

that he would be there for me when I needed him?

Eventually Scout and I got up and walked home. I was too restless to work on anything that required brainpower, so Scout and I practiced the “down” command. The goal was that he’d see my hand motion and hear the command, and do it, without my having to get down on the floor with him.

He couldn’t concentrate—he kept trying to lick my hand and my face. Did that mean that he knew how upset I was and he was more focused on making me feel better than on some dumb command? I couldn’t tell, but I gave up and we just sat on the floor and played together for a while.

A surprising number of people chose to wait until Saturday night to call for help with their health care spending accounts, so I was busy until the early hours of the morning, when I finally went to bed. Scout climbed up in the bed with me and rested at my feet, and we both dozed off.

When I woke, it was mid-morning Sunday, and I didn’t remember any bad dreams. I put on my headset and worked with Scout when I didn’t have any calls. He was a smart boy and learned quickly, though I was careful to keep reinforcing his behaviors with lots of praise and, eventually, fewer and fewer hot dog treats.

I practiced remembering those days in Afghanistan, as Grace had suggested, and though the memories killed me, Scout was learning how to bring me back from them. I kept thinking about Grace, and I realized that more and more I wanted to try again with her. She explained that she’d understood why I had acted the way I did, and it didn’t seem to have changed anything between us. I decided to man up once more and I texted her using the voice input on my phone. “How can we practice the other two things you said Scout needs to learn?”

“Meet me at the ArtsPark,” she texted back a few minutes later. “Twenty minutes?”

I sent her a thumbs up, and looked over at Scout, who had jumped up at the sound of my voice and was wagging his tail enthusiastically. It looked like I could use the plume of his tail for dusting if I ever needed to.

I leashed Scout and we walked through downtown Hollywood toward the ArtsPark at Young Circle. From a couple of blocks away I heard a rapper singing about booze and booty. Not my favorite kind of music, but I was curious to see what Grace had in mind.

She looked even prettier than she had the night we went to dinner. She wore a tight T-shirt with a dog in a canoe and the logo “Dog Paddle” beneath it, along with denim shorts. I felt something stirring down below that I hadn’t felt in quite a while. Once again we stood awkwardly when we met, unsure how to greet each other, until she leaned in and kissed my cheek quickly.

“I’m glad you texted,” she said. Scout nosed her and wagged his tail, and she stroked the top of his head.

“I’m glad you agreed to meet.” I winced. “Though the music is pretty loud.”

“That’s the point. We’re going to try a technique called guiding. Sometimes a person with PTSD will get triggered in a location, and need to get away. We’re going to see if we can train Scout to do that for you.”

“How does that work?”

“It’s like interruption, only Scout will recognize that he needs to get you away from the thing that’s triggering you. I want you and Scout to go over there and sit down. Close your eyes and listen to the music and see if anything triggers you.”

“I’m scared I’ll do something to hurt someone,” I said. “Out here in public.”

“I’ll be right over there watching you. Don’t worry, I’ll jump in if things don’t go well.” She looked so earnest that I had to believe her.

I sat down with Scout and closed my eyes and listened to the music, even though I hated it. It seemed to take a long time, but it was probably only about ten or fifteen minutes before the drummer launched into a solo, banging at them in a way that triggered a memory of bombs going off.

I felt myself shaking, and Scout nuzzled me, but I couldn’t seem to get out of the dream. After a moment he was on his feet, tugging on the lead. I held onto him. He was my tether to the real world and I couldn’t let go.

He was strong, though, and he kept pulling, until finally I opened my eyes and stood up. I was still shaking but ahead of us I saw Grace motioning toward her, and Scout pulled in that direction.

My body was filled with adrenaline and I could barely walk, but Scout’s presence on the other end of the lead was comforting, and so was seeing Grace. The two of them were looking out for me. She put her hand on my upper arm. “Sorry. I didn’t realize that would be so bad for you. I shouldn’t do this. I’m not a therapist. I’m just a dog trainer.”

The warmth of her hand on my arm stilled me even more, and I forced myself to smile. “My dad used to say it doesn’t work unless it hurts,” I said. “But I don’t think I can do that again right now. Can we get out of here?”

“Sure.” She led the way out of the park, and Scout and I followed. We took our time strolling down Hollywood Boulevard, in the shade of the trees, and stopped for ice cream. I got Scout a tiny bowl of vanilla and put it on the

ground in front of him. He sniffed it curiously for a moment, then began lapping it up eagerly.

I ordered chocolate peanut butter and Grace had strawberry, and we sat at a table on the sidewalk. “I know I’m messed up, but I feel a lot better when I’m with you,” I said, digging out the last of my ice cream. “Would you consider going on another date with me?”

She smiled. “Isn’t that what we’re doing now?”



14: FIND MY: GRACE

I was sorry that I had to put Alex through the trauma at the Arts Park, but he bounced back, and it seemed like Scout might learn the guiding command.

The only other thing I wanted to teach them was deep pressure therapy. But to do that, I'd have to go over to Alex's house. I wasn't sure either of us were ready for that kind of intimacy.

I stopped at the Publix on my way home, and I was examining avocados when a voice behind me said, "Hey, stranger."

I recognized the voice without even turning around. It was Garrett Lam, and when I did turn, I saw that even though pets weren't allowed in the store, he had his Pekingese, Lily, with him, on a leash.

That was Garrett. Rule-breaker.

"Hey," I said. I leaned down to chuck Lily under her chin. "How are you, pretty girl?"

She opened her mouth wide in a doggy grin. I hadn't missed Garret, but I had missed Lily.

I had deleted Garrett from my contacts when we broke up. I remember my hand shaking when I hit those buttons. And now he was back?

"I'm sorry for the way we ended things," Garrett said. "I was in a bad place then, lots of stress from work and my parents. I'm much better now."

"That's great," I said. I grabbed one of the avocados and put it in my cart and tried to walk away, but Garrett kept talking.

“It’s really fate that I ran into you today,” he said. “I’ve dated a couple of girls since we broke up, but none of them compares to you.”

Garrett and I had one of those explosive, lust-based relationships. He worked with Becca at the Seminole Hard Rock hotel, where he was a blackjack dealer and she was a customer relations rep while she was getting her master’s degree. Becca and I were walking on the Hollywood Broadwalk, the paved pedestrian walkway along the beach, when we ran into him.

I felt a spark immediately. His father was Chinese and his mother Scotch-Irish, and liked many mixed-race people, he was gorgeous, with the best features of both sides. He was five-nine, a couple of inches taller than I was, with an oval face, floppy black hair, and a slight tilt to his eyes. We started flirting immediately, and eventually Becca peeled off and let us go to dinner together. “You’re blonde but I’ll bet you have Latin blood in you,” he said. “I can tell, you’re very dynamic.”

“My mom’s maiden name was Castillo,” I said. “But I look more like the de Windt side of the family.” I put my thumbs in my cheeks and wiggled them. “Little Dutch girl.”

“It’s in the eyes,” he said. “Shakespeare wrote that the eyes are the window to the soul, and I can see that in you. There’s a depth to you I’ll bet nobody else has seen.”

Guys usually said I was sweet, or perky, or cute. Nobody had seen depth in me until Garrett. Of course it was a line, but I fell for it. Looking back, I see that we only told each other parts of our stories—the parts we wanted to share.

I talked about my parents’ romance and growing up in Miami with Mercy. How we went swimming in Biscayne Bay, hiking in the Everglades,

fishing in the Keys. His parents were hard-working immigrants who owned a restaurant in Lakeland, in the middle of the state, and he was desperate to get to the bright lights of Miami. His parents had only agreed he could go to Florida International University if he majored in hospitality, so that one day he could take over the restaurant, but he wanted to own a nightclub and he was never going back to Lakeland.

That should have been a warning. A boy who was willing to lie to his parents about his future could lie to anyone about anything. And though he didn't say it outright, I believed that Garrett saw owning a nightclub as the key to dating a succession of beautiful women.

"I'm glad things are better," I said. "Do your parents still expect you to move back to Lakeland?"

He shook his head. "My dad sponsored a cousin from Hong Kong, who has a wife and two teenagers. All four of them have been working in the restaurant, and he thinks eventually he'll sell it to them."

"That's great. You're still at the casino?"

"No, that's the other good thing. I'm the assistant manager at a club in Miami now, in Wynwood. A really happening neighborhood, busy all the time."

"That probably takes up a lot of your time," I said. "I hope things keep going well for you. I really need to finish my shopping."

"Wait, Grace. Can we have a drink sometime? For old times' sake?"

Garrett and I went to bed after the second date, and the sex was explosive. He was a skilled lover, which should have been another red light. A guy who's had a lot of practice is probably someone who jumps from girl to girl. But Garrett was totally attentive to me. We texted off and on during the day

and I drove over to the casino to see him on his breaks. We often found ourselves stuck away in a back corridor making out. I felt wild and carefree with him. Until the first time he slapped me during sex. “Hey,” I said. “I don’t like that.”

“Sorry, I don’t know where that came from,” he said. “My bad.”

That was the beginning of the end. Garrett began to get very possessive, wanting to know where I was all the time. He installed an app on my iPhone called “Find My,” so that he could see where I was.

One day I told him about an older man, a very successful businessman, who needed help training his beagle, which is the most headstrong breed I’ve ever worked with. I tried to explain about the dog’s behavior, but all Garrett wanted to know was if the client was handsome, if he was rich, if he had an expensive car. “Do you want to date him?” he asked. “Yuck. He’s like fifty years old.”

“Some women like that. Being arm candy to a rich guy.” From then on, any time I ever mentioned a guy whose dog I was training, he got very jealous, sure that I was having sex with the guy instead of working with the dog.

The last straw was when he tried to restrain me when we were having sex. I was tired, and he’d already come once, and I wanted to stop, but he held me down. He wasn’t all that strong, not as muscular as Alex, but he was still stronger than I was. I began to get a panic attack, wondering if this was the way my parents had interacted. I was determined not to fall into that trap. That gave me the strength to push off him.

“I can’t do this,” I said. “I don’t like being pushed around, I don’t like feeling that you have me on a lead. We’re done.”

As soon as I got home, I deleted the Find My app from my phone. But he kept calling and texting me, until I blocked his number.

“I’ve changed, really,” he said. “I wish you’d give me another chance.”

I looked at him. He was still handsome and charming, and I was glad things were looking up for him. But he was working at a nightclub, which meant he’d be exposed to a lot of other women, many of them beautiful. He was starting a whole new life, and I didn’t see myself in it.

“I don’t think so, Garrett. But I wish you a lot of luck.”

I pushed my cart away, and he didn’t follow me.

I needed some bottled water, but when I got to that aisle my hands were shaking, and I abandoned my cart and headed for the door. I didn’t see Garrett or Lily again.

When my mother was younger, she was a smart, sexy Latina, willing to leave her island behind to get an education and make a new life for herself. I know that’s what attracted my father to her. He was an ordinary-looking guy, only about five-seven with blonde hair that was already thinning in his twenties. In pictures of them as a young couple, you can see how proud he is to have snared such a beautiful woman. And she was happy to have found a hard-working man who would take care of her and her children. She’d experienced economic hardship in Puerto Rico and was happy to put it behind her.

Back then I thought it was magnetism. My dad loved to be touching my mom—holding her hand, or his arm around her shoulders or her waist. I thought that was love, but maybe it was possessiveness. He recognized how beautiful she was and wanted to make sure that the world knew she was his.

I didn't want to be anyone's possession. I hadn't dated anyone since Garrett. Alex was the first guy I had any real interest in. But was he another heartbreak in the making? He was strong enough to hold me down if he wanted. And he was broken, and maybe he couldn't be fixed by a service dog and some therapy. Did I want to open myself up to that kind of drama again?

I called Becca as soon as I left the grocery. "You busy? Want to go for a walk?"

"Perfect timing," she said. "I've been obsessing over a sestina and I can't find a good word that rhymes with randy and I need to take a break." She sighed. "I probably just need to get laid. But a walk will help."

"Bring the boys," I said.

I picked her up a few minutes later and we drove over to South Lake, near the Somogyis' house. Dogs weren't allowed on the Broadwalk, the paved walkway that runs along the beach. Since I'd met Garrett there I didn't want to go back there immediately after seeing him.

"I saw Garrett today at the Publix," I said, as she climbed into my car. She had Navajo in his carrying pouch and Henry in her arms.

"OMG," she said.

"Exactly. He told me he's changed, and he asked me out again."

She turned to me after she closed the door and fastened her seat belt.

"What did you say?"

"No. But it freaked me out. I had to get out of there as soon as possible."

"Did he have Lily with him? She's such a sweet dog."

"He did, even though he shouldn't. He told me that his parents had brought in some cousins from Hong Kong to run the restaurant, and he's

working at a nightclub in Wynwood.”

Henry tried to climb out of Becca’s lap to drive with me, and even though I knew it was wrong I let him.

“I can deal with the old memories,” I said. “I’ve moved on. But he made me think about Alex.”

I turned south from Hollywood Boulevard, toward the Somogyis’. I knew there was a parking space by their house I could use.

“What about Alex?” Becca asked.

“I can’t decide if I want to keep going out with him or not.”

I parked the car and we got out, with Navajo and Henry on leashes. “Pros and cons?” Becca asked.

“Pros first. He’s handsome and muscular but he’s smart and sensitive, too. I love the way he interacts with Scout. Like they’re a real team.”

“Cons?”

I sighed. “PTSD. I don’t know how bad it is or how treatable it is. And he’s lonely, and I don’t know if that’s because of his PTSD or because he’s not able to make friends, to trust people.”

“It sounds like he trusted you at the ArtsPark,” she said.

“He did. But it was also scary to see how upset he got. He’s already reacted badly once, when he heard those noises and knocked me down. I know he was trying to protect me, but what if I’d gotten hurt? Do I want to risk that?”

“To date a boy I hardly know, my heart says yes my brain says no,” Becca said. “That’s iambic tetramer. Four iambs per line.”

“Do you have to make everything in life into a poem?” I asked, laughing.

She linked her arm in mine. “You’d be surprised at how often poetry comes in handy.” Her eyes opened wide. “And that rhymes with randy! Oh, I am a genius.”

She started muttering lines of poetry as we walked. But that was fine with me. I needed to think about Alex Dow.



15: KINGS AND QUEENS: ALEX

I couldn't stop thinking about Grace. For the first time in a long time, I was attracted to a woman. But was I too messed up? She'd confided to me about her father, so I knew she was vulnerable. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt her.

I waited until Monday morning to text her, because I didn't want to come off too strong. "Fun yesterday despite the drama," I wrote. "Thanks."

She responded with a heart and a thumbs up. Both made me smile.

I had slept well, so I logged some hours on customer service. I was almost finished with the dollhouse except for the little stuff. I looked through some magazines and cut out tiny pictures, then built wooden frames to go around them, and hung them on the walls. It was starting to look like a real house, and I wondered what I was going to do with it when I was finished.

I'd never played with dolls as a kid. I had cowboys and Indians and horses, and I used to set up mock battles where they chased each other. GI Joe was also a big part of my childhood. He didn't go to tea parties with other soldiers, but we wandered around the neighborhood exploring. He got into battles with other kids' Transformers and Ninja Turtles. And nobody ever suggested that we were playing with dolls.

It was my turn to ask Kenny for help. I texted to see if I could come over that evening, and he agreed. Then I gave Scout a good long walk and then dinner, and put on my headset for another couple of hours.

After dinner we walked to Kenny's house. Scout heeled perfectly, even when a squirrel darted in front of us, and again when a gecko appeared from

the underbrush, stared at us for a moment and then rushed away.

I didn't feel any hesitation going into Kenny's house. It had become a familiar location like Java Boys, and I had Scout there with me. As the dogs rushed each other, then raced around, Kenny led me to the living room and he grabbed a couple of beers from the fridge while I sat on an armchair, leaning forward just in case I had to get up quickly.

He handed one to me and sat on the sofa, his back against one arm. The dogs got tired, and curled together, as they might have when they were being whelped. "Grace says I need to be more assertive with Cheyenne," Kenny said. "But I don't want to be his boss. I just want him to love me."

"He does love you. I can see it in the way he follows you around. But you can't let him think he's in charge because that's going to stress him out."

"How can my loving him stress him out?"

I kicked off my shoes and crossed my legs on the couch so that I was facing Kenny. "Remember, dogs are pack animals, and packs have leaders. The leader is responsible for the rest of the pack. If one of the pack is gone, the leader will worry. That's why dogs bark and cry by the door."

"But I thought Scout was going to be your service dog. Doesn't that make him in charge of protecting you?"

"It's not like that. He doesn't make sure it's safe for me to cross the street or anything. He's just there so that when I get tense I have him to relax me. But he knows that's his job—working for me. If you love Cheyenne, you have to take charge." I leaned back against the couch. "That's part of what makes the PTSD so tough. I feel out of control. And I never know what's going to trigger an attack."

"That must be tough," he said. "Are there any specific things?"

“Loud noises and sudden movements freak me out,” I said. “Not always, but if my brain thinks there’s gunfire, or someone near me wants to hurt me, my reactions kick in.”

I took a couple of deep breaths. I can do this, I thought. “I have these bad dreams, basically rehashing stuff that happened in the past. I think I must start yelling because that wakes up Scout and he starts to sniff and lick me.”

“And that helps?”

I nodded. “Grace calls it interruption. It brings me back to the real world. I’m hoping that having him around will make those bad dreams go away.”

I took another long sip of my beer. “I don’t like being in crowds—I have to go to the Publix early in the morning or late at night when there aren’t many people around, and forget about going to a mall. Mostly I order stuff online.”

“So you’re an Amazon queen,” Kenny said, and smiled slyly.

“Amazon king,” I said.

Suddenly he began to sing. “Lavender blue, dilly dilly, lavender green. If you were king, dilly dilly, I’d be your queen.”

I laughed. “You have a good voice,” I said.

“I did musical theater in high school,” he said. “Started in college, too, but then I met Gary and he took up a lot of time.” He sighed. “We used to sit like this together on the sofa. I know I need to get him out of my head, but it’s hard. You ever have somebody like that?”

I shook my head. “I’ve never had a real, long-term relationship. I was working full-time and going to college after high school, and then I joined the

military. I had sex now and then, but never with anything like romance.” I took a deep breath. “Like I feel with Grace.”

“I envy you to be starting something,” Kenny said. “I don’t have the courage for that yet. I think that’s why I got Cheyenne—sort of like a starter boyfriend.”

“But you were with Gary for a while, weren’t you?”

“He and I got together in college. We grew up together, and gradually we just grew apart. Even the sex didn’t keep us together again. When he wanted to have sex, he’d just say, ‘go wash your penis,’ and that was my cue.”

“Not exactly a romantic, was he?”

“We got tired of each other. I didn’t realize how much I resented him until he was gone. But at the same time it was like losing an arm or a leg. I felt it missing all the time.”

“What do you think I should do about Grace?”

He laughed. “Me? I’m no expert.”

“But you’ve been through a relationship. You know what it means.”

“Look, things are different between straight and gay guys. In some ways you have it easier. You can see a girl you like and approach her, and not worry that you’re going after some straight dude who’s going to punch you out for touching his arm.”

Ouch. I remembered the guy on the street who’d felt my biceps and called them guns, and how I’d whacked him.

“But the advantage gay guys have is that we can both be clear about what we want. If I see a guy in a bar and we make eye contact, then I know we

both want to get into each other's pants. If it goes on from there, fine. If not, fine."

"That's not the way you felt about Gary, though."

"It was at first. But girls, you have to go slower. They're more about the emotion than guys." He laughed. "Look at me, a gay loser trying to tell a handsome straight guy how to score with a woman."

"This is a dumb question, and probably offensive. But the beer has loosened me up enough to ask."

"You want to know if in a gay couple, one guy is the man and the other the woman."

I felt myself blushing. "Yeah, I guess that's it."

"It's not just about who does what to whom," he said. "I know masculine guys who like football and beer and like to bottom. I think it's more like one is more sensitive and interested in feelings and the other is more rough-and-tumble. Opposites attract and all that. Gary was the big man in our relationship and he used to call me the ball and chain. But he was the one who liked a dick up his ass."

I held up my hand. "More than I wanted to know."

"The thing is, you and Grace have a vibe together," he said. "I think you should go after that. Even if it doesn't work out, you'll get some practice."

"And maybe get my heart broken?"

He shook his head. "Take it from me, it takes more than a couple of dates to get your heart broken."

That night when got home I still had a buzz from the raspberry beer, so I texted Grace. "Free for dinner one night?"

Then I waited. I saw the three dots on my phone showing she was typing, but nothing came through. Either she was writing *War and Peace*, or she wasn't sure what she wanted to say. Join the club, I thought.

Finally the message came through. "You like Greek?" I almost laughed. That was what took so long?

I texted back. "I like the Greek place on Hollywood Boulevard. And they have outdoor tables so I can bring Scout."

"Tomorrow at 7?" she wrote. I sent her a thumbs up. Then I grabbed my beautiful dog around the neck and kissed his head.

I slept through the night, with Scout beside me, and that meant I had to spend most of the day with my headset on, to get in my hours. I helped a lot of people navigate the complexities of their accounts, and that made the time pass enough so that I didn't stress about meeting Grace for dinner.

I fed Scout his kibble, and he attacked it eagerly. After he finished eating, I took him for a long walk, then we met Grace at the restaurant.

She was pretty as ever, but I hardly noticed, because I was focused on her lips. I wondered what it would be like to kiss her, and I was embarrassed that I started tenting my shorts and had to sit down quickly at the table. She had the roast chicken and I had the moussaka, but that's about all I remember from the meal.

We talked about our backgrounds and what we wanted from life, and I realized I was how I was falling in love with this woman. After dinner, we started walking, and it took me a while to realize we weren't going toward my bungalow.

We turned a corner and Grace pulled out a set of keys. "This is my place," she said. She let me in, and then turned and locked the door. Before I

had a chance to say anything about the apartment, she turned to me and kissed me.

Her lips were soft and smooth, and I liked the way she put just enough pressure into the kiss to let me know she was serious. I kissed her back, of course, and then wrapped my arms around her.

I liked having Grace so close to me. I was scared that something would happen to trigger an attack, but at the same time I was determined to get over myself, to push forward with something that frightened me. Grace turned her head toward me. The endorphins rose in my blood stream, but in a good way. I hadn't felt like that in a long time, and it was good.

We kissed for a while. Scout found a place on the floor where he could watch us, attentive to any threat, but I knew I was in good hands with Grace.

"We should probably get our clothes off," Grace said, tugging at my waistband. "Don't want to cause a wardrobe emergency."

It must have been that word, emergency. Suddenly my brain was filled with the sound of sirens, and I was back in Afghanistan and there were incoming mortars. I wanted to run but I couldn't abandon my team. I had to stay and fight. But where was my M-16? I looked around but couldn't see it.

When I reached out, my hand touched something warm and furry instead of hard metal. Scout. I opened my eyes. Scout was licking my hand, and Grace was staring at me, her mouth open. "Are you okay?"

My mouth was dry and my pulse was racing. It took me a moment to answer. "Sorry. I didn't mean to freak you out."

"I guess emergency is one of your trigger words," she said.

"I guess so. That kind of ruined the mood, didn't it?"

“We could try again,” she said. “Only without words this time.”

It was close to two AM by the time we were both satisfied and yawning, full of happy endorphins. “I should get home,” I said.

“You don’t have to go.”

I took a deep breath. “This was a big step for me. A good step, a great step. But I’ve learned that I can only push myself so far. It’s nothing about you, but I need to get back to familiar surroundings.”

She sat up, her ponytail loosened so that her blonde hair fell over her shoulders, and I thought I was a fool to leave, but I knew that I had to be in good mental shape to continue anything with Grace, and it was better to be safe.

Scout knew that it was time to head for home, and I followed his lead. I knew that I should be practicing the “heel” command with him, keeping him by my side instead of out in front of me, but for the moment I wanted him there, walking point.

The street that led back to my bungalow was shadowy, with only a few house lights on. Ahead of us, the road was busy and well-lit, and I hurried forward. In the distance I heard the whistle and rumble of the Florida East Coast railroad. By the time I reached the grade crossing, though, the arms were down and the red lights flashing, and the train was only a few hundred feet ahead.

The CSX rail lines ran about a mile from where I grew up in Indiana, and as a kid I’d hear that lonely whistle and daydream about hopping on a train and heading far away to have adventures. In a way, that’s probably what led me to the military—the chance to go somewhere new, become someone different.

That sure as hell happened. Basic training, my combat engineer course, and life in a battle zone changed me in many ways. But at heart I was still that lonely boy listening to the train whistle. By the time the train passed, I was feeling better. An older woman was waiting on the other side of the tracks, and we nodded to each other as we passed. I was okay, I thought. In Hollywood I was surrounded by good people. That this was home, and it made me feel safe. With Scout by my side, I felt I could do anything.



16: FEATHER BED: GRACE

I wanted to take things slow with Alex. I was glad he wasn't as knowledgeable in bed as Garrett—it gave me the chance to take the lead, to show him what I liked. He was an intriguing mix of gentle and strong, able to hold me in a way that I felt protected, yet not overwhelmed.

He texted me the next morning to say that he'd had fun and hoped I had, too. I deliberately waited a couple of hours to answer him, so I wouldn't fall into the same hectic pattern I had with Garrett. But I didn't need to worry about that with Alex—he texted me again that he was working, and then needed to spend time with Scout, and he'd get back to me that evening. That was fine with me.

I was surprised later that evening when he texted and asked if I would be available for lunch the next day. I agreed, but he wouldn't give me any details. "It'll be a surprise," he said.

I spoke to Becca after that. "Surprises are nice," she said.

"You don't think he's starting the same pattern as Garrett, do you? Taking charge of everything?"

"Grace, slow down," Becca said. "You can't keep comparing Alex to Garrett. They're two different guys."

"But Garrett was part of a pattern," I said. "Guys with problems I tried to fix. And Alex certainly has his share of problems."

"Has he given you any indication that those problems involve women?"

I sat back on the sofa, the phone against my ear, and picked up a bottle of nail polish. “No. His problems all have to do with the Army, as far as I can tell.”

“You said he’s seeing a therapist for those, right?”

“Well, he said the guy is a counselor at the VA. I’m not sure that’s the same thing as a therapist.” I stuffed Styrofoam spreaders between my toes and went to work.

“Maybe you should ask him that,” Becca said. “Is this guy just helping him return to the world after his service, or is he a psychologist or a psychiatrist.”

“It’s hard to bring that up in conversation.”

“You guys seem to have a strong connection. See what happens tomorrow at lunch, if there’s a good way to bring it up.”

Becca and I talked for a few more minutes and then I finished with my toenails. I surveyed my hands—the polish there was still good, not chipped or flaking. I could go another few days without changing.

Alex texted me the next morning, asking me to come to a pocket park along Hollywood Boulevard, halfway between his place and mine, at noon. I agreed, curious. When I got there, he had spread a cloth on the ground for a picnic, and towels for both of us to sit on. He had a plastic container full of food and drinks.

“You said you like bagels,” he said. “I drove out to the Brooklyn Bagel Factory and got us an assortment, along with regular cream cheese and the kind with lox. Orange juice and water.”

“This is perfect,” I said, as I sat down. With Scout, we made our own little threesome in the middle of the city. The weather was warm, with a nice

breeze coming in from the ocean, and the sky was a light blue dappled with puffy clouds that showed no hint of rain.

“What were you like in high school?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I guess I was a jock. I lifted weights, but I couldn’t play any organized sports because I worked most days after school and most weekends. I sold tickets at the movie theater and bagged groceries at the supermarket. In the summers I worked construction as soon as I was old enough. My dad was good with his hands and had lots of tools and he showed me how to do things. I can hang and tape drywall, install ceiling grids and put together furniture.” He looked down at the tablecloth. “I’ve been building a dollhouse in my spare time.”

“A dollhouse? Why? Do you know a little girl who wants one?”

“It’s a small project I can work on in my house. I’ve got it all framed out, and built the roof, though I haven’t fastened it on yet. The floors are in, and the ceilings, and I’ve even got a couple of light fixtures.”

“Wow. I’d love to see it.”

He smiled shyly. “It still needs a lot of work. I can’t sew, so I can’t make any of the curtains or tablecloths or sheets.”

“I can help you with that,” I said. We ate and we talked, and it was very sweet. I tried to remember the last time I’d been on a picnic, and it had been years. I wouldn’t have thought of setting one up, but I enjoyed myself.

When we were finished, Alex cleaned everything up, and we stood. He kissed me, gently, and then backed away. “This was nice,” I said. “Thank you for organizing it.”

“My pleasure. You’ve done so much for Scout and me, I wanted to do something for you.”

I walked back to the pet store for my afternoon appointment and it felt like my feet barely touched the ground. What could I do to demonstrate my thanks?

Help him with his dollhouse.

That evening, I hunted around my apartment for scraps of fabric, and I put them with my portable sewing kit. Then I texted him, “Why don’t I bring dinner to your place tomorrow night?” He sent back two red hearts almost immediately.

I had training clients back-to-back almost all day, but I had time right before dinner to drive over to the fried chicken place and get a bucket for us to share. Then I showed up at his door with the food, my sewing kit, and a treat for Scout. His house was an old bungalow from the 1950s, on a street of similar homes. The front yard was gravel, but he’d placed a line of tropical plants alongside the driveway. His car was under the carport, and there was a pegboard wall of tools hung beside it.

He opened the door and smiled, and Scout went down on his front paws in the play position. I kissed Alex hello and then rubbed behind Scout’s ears.

The living room was simply furnished, with a couch and a kitchen table and chairs, and a bookcase along one wall. I could tell Alex had cleaned up the little house in expectation of my visit and I was pleased by that.

“That chicken smells delicious,” Alex said. He led me to the table, which he’d set with mismatched china and silverware, probably from the thrift shop.

“Your mom was Puerto Rican, right?” he asked, as we sat down at his table. “Do you speak Spanish?”

I shook my head. “Not very well. My father didn’t like to be left out, so we couldn’t speak Spanish at home, and I only learned what they taught in

school. I can speak enough to help someone with their dog. *Abajo* is down, *siéntate* is sit, and so on.”

I reached over and ruffled the dog’s fur. “¡*Buen perro! Muy bien.*”

Scout smiled, and with Alex’s permission I gave him a piece of one of the rolls. We each grabbed chicken from the bucket and started to eat. After a while, I asked, “Are you still having episodes?”

He nodded. “I had one last night. But Scout was right there, licking my face, and I felt better almost immediately.”

“This person you’re seeing at the VA, is he a counselor as in therapist? Or someone who’s helping you adjust to the non-military world?”

“A bit of both. He has a degree in counseling, and he’s been giving me homework assignments to help me assimilate. That’s how I met Akimbo at the coffee shop. D’eriq told me I had to go somewhere like a bar or a restaurant and engage in conversation with the server.”

“Was that hard?”

He shrugged. “I can talk to people once I know them. I have this fear that someone will look at me and think I’m crazy.”

“Because of the episodes? Do they come on without warning?”

“They do. Even here in the house if there’s a loud noise outside. But I’m getting better. I used to wake up three or four times in the middle of the night, sweaty and frightened. But with Scout, I can sleep through the night.” He laughed. “I used to do most of my customer calls in the early morning because I couldn’t get back to sleep. My manager liked having me online then. Now I’m on a more regular schedule.”

“And is that okay?”

“I’m good at figuring out what’s wrong with a client’s account,” I said. “Now that I’ve had some time to get familiar with the system. So my average time online with a client has been dropping, and he’s happy about that.”

“Have you ever thought about seeing a psychiatrist or a psychologist?” I asked.

He shook his head. “A psychiatrist just wants to solve your problems with pills, and I don’t need any more of those. D’eriq referred me to a psychologist, but all she wanted to do was talk about my experience in the war. It was almost like she was a war junkie.”

“That sounds like exposure therapy,” I said. “Kind of like what I’ve been doing with you and Scout.”

“Exactly. And I’d much rather work with you than with a therapist.”

After we ate, we settled down on his living room floor to work on the dollhouse together. He handed me a tiny bed he’d made himself, and I measured it and cut sheets out of an old handkerchief. Then I began working on a quilt for it, sewing together small square patches in a log cabin pattern my father’s mother had taught me when I was little.

We worked together very well, sharing bits and pieces of our background as he glued and I sewed. It was so nice and warm. I couldn’t remember any time I’d spent with Garrett that was so simple and yet fulfilling. When I finished the quilt, we made the bed with the sheets and the quilt. “It needs pillows,” I said. “I can make you a couple. I have a sewing machine at my apartment. I can put some cotton balls together and sew a hem around the edges.”

“We make a good team,” Alex said. “That’s something I learned in the military. It takes all kinds of different talents to create a working squad.”

I stood up. “This was fun, but I have an early client tomorrow.”

He stood too. “That’s fine. I need to take Scout out for his walk. Then I might put a couple of hours in until I feel tired.” We kissed goodnight, and it felt sweet, but also comfortable. Loving Alex was like falling into a big feather bed. I just had to make sure not to fall too far until I knew him better.



17: PROGRESS: ALEX

When I began seeing D'eriq, he gave me a list of skills I could practice to help me overcome my PTSD. I had to recognize that my anxiety was a normal physical response which could be reprogrammed.

He gave me breathing and muscle relaxation exercises to do, and told me that if I felt trapped in a flashback one way I could get out of it was to visualize and describe my actual environment. I'm not in Afghanistan, I'm in my living room on the lumpy couch I bought at the second-hand store.

I could also do things like say the alphabet backwards or list animals that began with each letter—anything to shift my brain's focus.

Scout helped with all that. By the time I'd had him for six weeks, I was sleeping through the night, and not getting triggered so easily by loud or unexpected noises. A big chunk of that progress was due to having the dog around. I had begun to face my fears and rely on him to help.

I became a regular at Java Boys, saying hello to strangers and not getting freaked out if they sat too close to me. I also began walking down Hollywood Boulevard at rush hour so that I could get accustomed to the squeal of brakes and the honk of horns.

Grace had also been important to my progress. Saturday morning was the last day of our beginner training class, and I hoped that she would continue to help me with Scout if we kept on dating. Friday evening I met with Kenny and Cheyenne to make sure they were ready for graduation the next morning. Scout and I arrived at his house, and he had brought in burgers and fries for

us. As we ate, we talked. Kenny said, “How are you doing? I mean, with Scout. Is he keeping you calm the way you want?”

“We’re working on it,” I said. “But sometimes things happen too fast. I built up these reflexes in the Army because I had to, to stay alive. It’s hard to turn them off.” I told him about the guy I’d karate-chopped. “At least I’m not doing that anymore.”

“That must have freaked him out,” Kenny said. “But I know how it is. I get nervous, too.” He poured some ketchup on his fries. “And how are things going with Grace?”

“We’re moving slowly,” I said. “I never really dated much, and I know she has had some problems in the past with guys coming on too strong. So I’m feeling my way along.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. Gary dragged me out of the closet before freshman year was over.” He laughed nervously. “Not like I was really in the closet, you know, the way I act. But I had never done anything about it.”

I figured there was more to the story so I waited. Cheyenne sat up next to Kenny and nuzzled his hand. Kenny peeled off a crust of hamburger bun and fed it to him. “Gary and I were together for twelve years,” Kenny said quietly.

“He died?” I asked gently.

Kenny shook his head. “I wish. He ran off with a daddy bear from San Francisco who was an original employee at Apple and made a ton of money on the stock.” He scratched the dog under his chin, then sat back up. “Good riddance to him. Now that I look back I realize he thought I was a meal ticket, and I’m surprised it took him so long to find someone richer.”

“Wow.”

“Not that I’m a mogul or anything,” Kenny said. “But I always made more money than Gary. He was one of those guys who never felt appreciated at any job, so he didn’t stay for very long. When I drive around Hollywood it’s like a tour of all Gary’s failed jobs. He was a server at Billy’s Stone Crab and a clerk at Target. He tended bar at Mickey Byrne’s and developed film at Walgreen’s.”

“You must be a good person,” I said. “To put up with him for so long.”

Kenny shrugged. “He had a big dick and we had a lot of sex for the first few years,” he said. “Then he got into body-building and started taking steroids and he lost interest in sex. At least with me.”

“Ouch.”

“But Grace seems like a nice girl. Anybody who loves dogs that much has to be good.”

“I agree.” I finished the last of my burger, and noticing that Kenny was done, too, I said, “Why don’t we run through the commands we learned.”

Kenny smiled, and both dogs jumped up. “That would be great.” We sat on the living room floor across from each other. I split my bag of hot dog bits into two and we practiced “sit” and “down.” Then Kenny backed away and we made sure Cheyenne remembered “stay” and “come.”

After we were confident both dogs could perform the next day, we quit training and played with them for a while. “Are you thinking about dating?” I asked.

“Not right now. I need to get comfortable with Cheyenne. But it’s good for me to see you and Grace together. That there are nice people out there.” The dogs were playing on the kitchen floor and one of them dropped a bone on the tile with a loud bang, and my body tensed up.

Kenny noticed and he yelled to the dog, “Cheyenne! Stop that. You’re freaking out the company.” The two dogs romped back to us, and just having Scout nuzzle my hand made me feel better.

“I should go,” I said. “It’s getting late and I should log on for some calls.”

“Thanks for coming over,” he said. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning.” Scout and I walked home. He heeled perfectly, though I let him stop and sniff and pee as he wanted. I thought everything was coming together in my life. I had a place to live, a job, a dog, a friend and a girl. The future was bright.



18: JERK: GRACE

Graduation day is my second favorite training class. It's so good to see dogs and their humans performing together, to know that I've helped them build their relationships.

We began with what I called the grand parade. Each of the handlers had their dogs on a tight lead, and they walked in a circle around the concrete-floored room. They demonstrated their ability to heel, though Cheyenne had some trouble ignoring the other dogs and Kenny had to yank on the lead a couple of times and repeat the command.

Then I called the nurse with the pit bull mix up to the front and she showed off the sit, stay and come commands. The nurse with the poodle followed, though the dog was still having some trouble with stay, and we worked together on that for a few minutes as everyone else watched.

Kenny and Cheyenne came up next, and I was pleasantly surprised that Cheyenne had mastered the basic commands. Kenny was still a loving daddy, but he had pulled some strength out of somewhere and deepened his voice to add some authority. I praised them both. "You guys are going to make a great team," I said.

Alex and Scout finished out the program. Of course, they did a great job, and I wished I could have shown the rest of the class the other skills Scout was developing. I was sure that his connection to Alex was going to be a long one that would benefit them both. Alex would get the care he needed and Scout would get the satisfaction of serving a purpose.

I handed everyone the graduation certificates I had printed up before the session. “Feel free to call me if you run into any problems,” I said.

After class, Alex hung around as usual, and I was glad, because I had follow-up plan for him. “I have a friend I’d like you to meet,” I said to Alex. “A former training client.”

“Really? Someone with a dog Scout can play with?”

“Well, she’s actually a behavioral therapist,” I said. “She teaches at FIU but she lives in Hollywood and she has a few clients she works with.”

Alex shook his head. “I told you, I tried therapy and it wasn’t for me. I’m making the progress I want with Scout.”

“I know, you and he are great together. But I think there’s more work you need to do, and I’m not capable of training you on my own.”

“Is that what we’ve been doing?” Alex asked. I could see him adopting a very defensive body position, his shoulders tucked in and his spine straight. “You’ve been training me? Does that involve sex as well as working with my dog?”

“You know what I mean.” Scout was alert beside Alex, his head up toward his master. I had a sudden flash. Was I trying to change Alex for myself? Or for him? Did I just want to make him a good boyfriend, one who I didn’t have to be afraid of?

Alex’s voice was grim. “No, I’m afraid I don’t,” he said. “I thought we were friends, and maybe developing into something more. I didn’t realize I was just a client to you.” He was being deliberately obtuse and I didn’t appreciate it.

I mimicked his stance, though because I was shorter it didn’t have the same effect. “Alex, you know you’re more than just a client.

He shrugged. "I am who I am."

Then he grabbed Scout's lead and walked off.

Well, that didn't go well. I realized that I hadn't anticipated Alex's resistance, which probably meant we didn't know each other well enough to jump into a deep relationship, no matter how much either of us wanted it. I called Becca and told her I needed an emergency afternoon cocktail. We met at a little bar on the Boardwalk, and once I had a margarita in my hand, I said, "I think Alex broke up with me this morning."

"You think?"

"We argued about what was happening between us. Was he a friend or a client? He got very argumentative, and I told him he was a jerk. He said he was who he was, and he walked off." I looked out at the ocean, the waves pushing relentlessly against the beach, the palm fronds swaying lazily in the breeze. So many happy-looking couples and families out there, enjoying the sunshine. Why couldn't I find a good man I could accept for who he was?

"You knew from the moment you met Alex that he had problems," Becca said. "So this can't be a huge surprise."

"But I thought we were getting along so well." I turned to her, so I didn't have to see all those happy families. I told her about the dollhouse. "I mean, isn't that sweet? The two of us working together, for something he's going to donate to charity when he finishes?"

"Sweet moments don't equal a life together," Becca said. "There are always bad ones in between. How you react to those determines if you get more of the sweet ones."

"And he reacted by telling me off and walking out. That's not a good sign."

“Again, you don’t know him that well, Grace. Is this the way he reacts to every problem? If so, then you’ve learned that early.”

She picked up her drink and sipped. “But maybe he’s the kind of guy who needs to think about things, and you blindsided him by suggesting he go to a therapist. You could have worked up to that more slowly. This woman is your client, isn’t she?” I nodded. “So I’m just saying, you could have arranged for the three of you to meet. Talk about dogs. Then gradually introduce the fact that she’s a therapist and see how Alex reacts. He might have gotten angry anyway, but he probably wouldn’t have lashed out at you in front of someone else.”

“But isn’t the result the same? He thinks he’s doing fine on his own and he doesn’t need help. Mine or anyone else’s.”

“He didn’t say that, did he? You probably made it sound like he was a project you were working on, not someone you care about.”

“Well, I’m not going to chase after him,” I said. “If he wants to apologize, I’ll listen. And then we’ll see.”

I wondered how long it would take Alex to reach out to me, if he did at all. Was he too proud to ask for help? Embarrassed that I’d seen him when he was in trouble? I thought of him working on the dollhouse, how patiently he built that tiny furniture. He had to realize that problems weren’t solved overnight. And that sometimes you needed help.

I worked at the pet store on Sunday, glad to keep busy and avoid thinking about Alex, because when I did I felt a soreness in my chest. The first sign of a broken heart, perhaps? Maybe if I ignored it long enough it would go away.

I still felt bad on Monday morning, but I threw myself into training Mrs. Somogyi and Ferko. By the time I left them, I assumed I never would hear

from Alex again. But when I got home, he and Scout were sitting on a bench outside my building. “I was a jerk on Saturday,” he said. “You called it exactly right. But the idea of seeing a therapist is a hot button for me. The one I went to didn’t do anything for me except dredge up bad memories. I don’t want to feel like I’m so broken that I need some professional help.”

“You let me help you.”

“With Scout.”

“But we were using Scout to help you with your PTSD. In the military didn’t you use a lot of different weapons, depending on what you were doing?” He stared at me. “Guns, mortars, tanks, right?”

“I guess.”

“This is the same thing. You’re fighting a different battle, with different weapons. Scout is one of them. The stuff you’ve learned about how he can help you. But what if only one weapon isn’t enough?”

“I understand what you’re saying, but I’m still not sure I want to start up with a therapist again.”

“I know you had a bad experience with one,” I said. I took a deep breath. “And I probably threw this idea at you without thinking about how you’d react. I had a couple of sessions with Hazel myself. We traded services for a while as I trained her Doberman, and she helped me work out some of my issues.

“Hazel helped me talk through some problems I had with my parents, and gave me some exercises to do, just like D’eriq has given you.”

He still didn’t look convinced.

“Just think about it, please?” I asked. “Think of it this way. You’ve been using a flat-head screwdriver to undo every bolt you’ve found. But in some cases, a Philips head could be an additional tool.”

He laughed. “How many more metaphors are you going to come up with?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Give me time.”

“I should probably say the same thing,” he said. “Give me time.”

“Well, I’m glad you came by,” I said. “And for the record, I don’t think you’re a jerk.” I smiled, then I turned, put my key in the lock, and walked inside. I let the door close behind me.



19: STARTING OVER: ALEX

After Scout and I left Grace's apartment building, I didn't know where to go. I didn't want to go home. So I stopped at Java Boys. I needed the caffeine, and I was desperate to talk to another human being, too. It was almost eleven o'clock, when the café closed for the night. A new barista was on night duty, one I didn't recognize. When I walked in, he was singing an Abba song to the customer in front of him. "Can you hear the drums, Fernando?"

"Like I've never heard that before," the guy grumbled. "Can I get my change?"

"Not a music lover, I guess," the barista said. He handed Fernando his change and took the next guy's order. "What's your first name?"

"Billy."

"Billy, don't be a hero," the barista sang, and the guy, a beary type in his forties, nodded approvingly, and stuffed a couple of bills in his tip cup. There was one more guy in line ahead of me. When he'd ordered, he said, "This one's going to be a challenge for you. "Rudy. And no reindeer, please."

"Hah," the barista said. "No challenge." He began to sing the Barenaked Ladies song, "A message for you, Rudy," and the guy applauded. After he paid the guy turned to me. "See if you can come up with a name Tristan doesn't have a song for."

"It's kind of my thing," Tristan said. He was skinny, with shaggy blond hair. "I know like a million songs."

"Sorry I can't challenge you too much," I said. "My name's Alex."

He really had a nice voice. “Come on and hear Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” he sang. Then he smiled and asked, “And your order?” I ordered my coffee and moved down the line to wait for the purple-haired girl behind the espresso machine to make it.

“I give him a different name every time I come in,” said the guy who’d given his name as Rudy.

“Next time tell him you’re Spartacus,” I said.

“Like the movie!” he said. “Yeah. That’ll stump him.” He grabbed his coffee and walked out. I listened to three more snippets of song as I waited, feeling proud of myself for being able to manage some human interaction.

With my cup in hand, I walked outside, got Scout, and we started walking. I wasn’t paying much attention to where we were going. I needed to walk, so that I could think about Grace.

I was torn. She clearly believed that therapy could help me, and I didn’t agree. I’d already been doing everything a therapist could suggest, and while it was working, the going was slow. If Grace wasn’t willing to wait, then that was on her. I couldn’t spend my life trying to please a pretty woman I’d had sex with once.

I finished my coffee, crumpled the cup, and looked for a garbage can. I couldn’t see one, and that’s when I realized I had walked far out of my normal range. It was very late, and I hadn’t even noticed.

The neighborhood looked sketchy, with broken-down cars on the grassy verge in front of run-down houses. I heard Latin music coming from somewhere, and people shouting. I turned around and headed back the way I’d come. A glance at my watch showed it was after one o’clock in the morning—not a good time for me to be out on these streets alone.

I was passing an old Spanish-style house when suddenly gunfire erupted from inside. I dropped to the ground and huddled around Scout. I wrapped my arms around him, feeling how he had grown so much bigger and stronger in just a few weeks. I rested my head against his, the soft fur there against my cheek.

I must have passed out, because I woke up to a police officer prodding me with his nightstick. "Come on, get up," he said.

I looked around, and there were flashing red and blue lights everywhere. People were shouting and there must have been a half-dozen cop cars there. Scout was on his haunches beside me, staring intently at the cop. I grabbed Scout's lead and stood up shakily.

The cop asked for my ID and I handed it to him. He used his flashlight to read it, then handed it back to me. "Far from home, aren't you?" he asked.

"Had a bad night," I said. "I started walking and didn't realize how far I'd come from home."

He shone his light directly into my eyes. "You're not high. Looking for a fix?"

I shook my head. "I have PTSD," I said. "I heard some gunshots and I must have passed out."

He looked at me. "You do that often?"

"That's why I have the dog," I said, holding up Scout's lead. He was still sitting obediently on his butt.

"All right, I'm going to let you go," the cop said. "Straight home, though, OK?"

“You got it. Thank you, sir.” He turned and walked back toward his car, and I hurried in the opposite direction, which fortunately was the right one. Scout walked point for me, leading me home, and by the time I got there, I was drenched in sweat.

That night could have gone very wrong. I could have gotten caught in that gunshot battle, or I could have been arrested for vagrancy or who knows what else. Maybe I wasn’t able to do all this on my own, and Grace was right.

The next morning I texted her to ask for her friend’s name and number, and on Wednesday morning I showed up for an appointment with Dr. Hazel Altman. She was a stately African-American woman with a long gray and black braid, and her office was decorated with Haitian art.

She had a treat ready for Scout when we walked in. He looked up at me, and I told him it was okay. He grabbed the treat and settled on the carpeted floor, chewing it.

Instead of jumping right into to talk about my war experiences, Dr. Altman said, “Let me get to know you. Tell me something about your childhood.”

It was very comfortable in her office, telling her about growing up in Carmel. “You had what we call a free-range childhood,” she said. “You made your own entertainment, with your friends. It led you to be self-reliant, and that’s a great thing. How did you feel when your father died?”

“Like I had to step up,” I said. “Lots of people said that to me at the funeral. That I was a man, and it was important for me to look after my mother. She wanted me to stay in college, but my father didn’t have life insurance or a pension and they’d never saved very much, so I had to drop out and go to work.”

“And then when you learned that your mother had been killed?”

I closed my eyes and let myself sink back into the memory. “My CO called me into his office after we returned from maneuvers. I was worried that I’d done something wrong, but from the kind look on his face I knew it was something worse.”

“Go on.”

“He told me about the accident, and encouraged me to talk about my parents. Were they proud I’d gone into the military? He didn’t realize at the time that my father was dead, too. He said he was very sorry, and encouraged me to talk to the chaplain if I needed to.”

“Did you?”

I shook my head. “My family wasn’t very religious. And my team needed me in the field.”

“You’re a strong young man, Alex,” Dr. Altman said. “You’ve overcome a lot of adversity in your life, and it’s made you very self-reliant. That’s generally a good trait. But sometimes we have to relax that attitude and let other people in. Have you made friends since you moved to Florida?”

Dr. Altman was easy to talk to, and I began to see how she could help me. It was interesting to look at the way that I’d grown up, and consider how losing my parents had made me feel like I needed to rely only on myself.

I was confident that we’d get to the PTSD eventually because I had begun to see how everything was connected. I texted Grace after our first session, and she responded with a thumbs-up. I would have rather had something more, but I settled for that.

I kept working with Scout, and doing exercises that Dr. Altman prescribed. Sometimes I took my laptop with me to Java Boys and worked

from there, sitting outside with Scout. I began to recognize regular customers and say hello.

People stopped to pet Scout or say how handsome he was. He was growing up, too. He and Cheyenne outgrew their puppy stages, and Kenny and I continued to have play dates for them. Kenny had started going out to bars to meet guys, and one night he left Cheyenne with me for a sleepover so he could go down to the Keys for an overnight with a new friend.

I was still worried that something unexpected would throw me for a loop, but I began to tolerate leaf-blowers and crazy drivers and the grind of garbage trucks much better. Dr. Altman and I eventually got into the topic of PTSD, and she said that a lot of what Grace had taught me and Scout seemed to be helping me a great deal. “You have to face the fact that there’s no cure for PTSD. What you can do is learn to manage your symptoms, and you’ve been doing very well with that so far.”

We were on our third week of meetings when she asked, “Have you been in touch with Grace?”

“I texted her after our first meeting, but that’s all.”

“Do you think you’re ready to talk to her again?”

I pursed my lips and looked at her. “Have you been talking to her?”

She shook her head. “Not since she called to recommend you. She told me a little about you and how she felt about you, but that’s all.”

“How does she feel?”

“That’s something you should take up with her, don’t you think?”

When I didn’t answer, she said, “When was the last time you had a significant episode?”

I had to think about that, and I realized that I was getting better. I didn't think I'd ever be fully free, but I was on the road, and much stronger than I'd been even a few weeks before.

"Last week, I think," I finally said. "Bad dream, but Scout woke me up before I got too deep into it."

"Keep up the good work, then," she said.

Scout and I left her office. Dr. Altman hadn't said so directly, but Grace was her friend, and she wouldn't be sending me back toward her if she didn't think I was ready.

I was thinking and wondering and somehow the dog led me to the pet store when I wasn't paying attention. "You want a new toy, buddy?" I asked as I realized where we were. "Why not? We should do some celebrating."

Scout and I walked inside and headed to the toy aisle. I picked up a couple of things but he wasn't interested. I handed him one end of a rubber rope. "Tug of war?" I asked, but he wouldn't bite. Then he yipped once, and when I looked up I saw Grace there. "Hey," I said, as I stood up.

"Hey," she said. Then she leaned down and rubbed Scout's head, and he smiled happily.

"I've been seeing Dr. Altman," I said. "Thanks for the recommendation. She's really helped me."

"That's good."

"How about you? How have you been?"

"Not bad. New obedience class. Those two guys with the Papillon who dropped out of your class have come back to try again. The dog sleeps in the bed with them and eats their hair."

I laughed. “Yuk.” Neither of us said anything for a moment, and then I said, “Dr. Altman asked about you. If I’d seen you recently.”

“So that’s why you’re here?”

“I think Scout led me here. Maybe he wants a new toy. Or maybe...” I had to ask. “Maybe I’d like to ask you for another chance.”

She smiled. “Only maybe?”

“I’m a lot better now. Would you be willing to go on another date with me?” She hesitated for long enough that I thought she was thinking of a polite way to say no, but instead she said, “Sure.”

We made plans to meet for dinner that night at the Greek restaurant on Hollywood Boulevard where we’d eaten before. I was so happy that I leaned over and kissed her cheek. She didn’t seem to mind.

When I got home, I rushed around cleaning up the bungalow. Maybe I was being too optimistic, but I was hoping that the evening might end at either her place or mine, and I wanted mine to be ready for her. I wasn’t a dirty guy, but Scout shed a lot and I ran the vacuum.

It’s funny, the noise was almost soothing to me, whereas when I first came back from Afghanistan I couldn’t stand it. Scout kept moving around the house trying to avoid the vacuum and I had some fun chasing him with it, though I could tell he found it a game rather than a threat.

I spent some time on customer calls, fed and walked Scout. Then I took a shower and got dressed, worrying over what I was wearing like some teenager on a first date. Fortunately, Scout kept me calm, and we walked over to the restaurant.

Despite everything she and I had been through, it felt comfortable seeing Grace by the restaurant door. This time neither of us hesitated, and we kissed

on the lips. Nothing super sexy, but a promise of things to come.

The dinner was great, and it felt like we were talking about everything and nothing all at once. We talked about what had happened to us since our last date. About how the world had changed, how I was doing in therapy. We talked a lot about Scout and all the things he liked to do.

By the end of the night, I knew that this time around things would be different. Not only had I gotten better, but Grace seemed different too. She was more understanding of my struggles with PTSD and grateful for the progress I'd made over the past few months.

Then we ended up at her place, and she invited me in. We curled up on the couch together with Scout sleeping between us, feeling both safe and excited at what this new start might bring us. And as I lay there with Grace in my arms, I realized something: no matter how dark things had been before or how much pain either of us had gone through in life, love could still be found in places you least expected it.

During the next week, we finished the dollhouse. Grace suggested that we take it to the shelter for abused women and children where she'd spent some time after her mother left her father, and late one afternoon we put Scout in the back seat of her car, and I carefully placed the dollhouse into the trunk.

I slid in beside her and locked in my seat belt. "Have you been back to this shelter since you and your mom and your sister moved out?"

"I haven't. But I talked to Mercy last night about it. We were both so frightened when we were there that it was hard to see the positives. They locked the doors at night, you know, and had a security guard with a gun at the front door during the day. At the time, we felt like it was a prison, but

now I know the guard and the locks were there to protect us from angry men.”

“That must have been tough.”

“It was. And my mother was so frail, recovering from her broken arms, so she couldn’t even hold us when we were frightened. I had Buddy, but Mercy was so lost. I think that’s why she left so soon afterward.”

“You’re talking to her more regularly, aren’t you?”

Grace nodded. “It’s good to have my sister back. For a long time, I felt all alone. Like you must have felt after your mother died.”

She turned onto the highway, and I tensed, but I remembered that Scout was in the back seat and Grace was a good driver, and we’d be fine. “I was lucky I was in the military then,” I said. “I had a whole band of brothers around me. For an only child, that was meaningful, and helped me get over her death, at least until I was discharged and found out my aunt and uncle had sold everything off. That was tough. I probably shouldn’t have left everything behind and moved to Florida, but I needed to make a clean break with the past.”

I looked over at her. “Talking to Dr. Altman has helped me see that you can never really leave your past behind.”

“That’s true. As evidenced by the fact that we’re heading to the halfway house where I spent some of the worst months of my life. But the people there did what they could for us, and I appreciate it.”

A few minutes later we were off the highway, driving through a poor neighborhood. Grace signaled, then turned into the driveway of a long, low building that resembled an Army barracks. I carried the dollhouse, and we walked up to the front door.

Grace had called ahead and given our names, so the guard let us in. The reception area was warm and welcoming, painted in yellow tones, with comfortable sofas and chairs. The administrator had identified a little girl to receive our gift, a six-year-old named Marvelene, and she and her mother came out to meet us.

Her eyes opened wide when she saw the dollhouse. I put it on the floor and sat with her, and showed her the rooms. She was already carrying a tiny doll that fit perfectly inside the house, and she walked it around from room to room. “I never lived in a house,” she said. “But Dolly can.”

Grace and I sat with Marvelene for a while and eventually they had to leave so they could eat dinner. Marvelene’s mother thanked us again and carried the dollhouse through another locked door, the little girl behind her. Grace took my hand as we walked back to the car.

“How did you feel being back there?” I asked.

“It wasn’t traumatic,” she said. “I was worried that it would be. But now I recognize that living there made me stronger. I hope Marvelene will feel the same way.”

“We make each other stronger,” I said.

We walked back outside, and I felt really happy that I’d been able to channel my post-war energy into something that made someone else happy.

We let Scout out of the car and he hurried over to a bush to leave his pee-mail. I looked at Grace and smiled, then took her hand and squeezed.



AUTHOR'S NOTE

Though Scout is part collie, he's largely based on my first golden retriever, Samwise. Like Alex, my husband and I browsed the available dogs and found two from the same litter. One was quiet and the other wild, and I said I wanted the quiet one. We brought him home and a few days later took him to a vet for a checkup. She suggested having his hips X-rayed because she was worried about the way that he moved.

Unfortunately, the reason for his quiet behavior was clear. His hips had already started giving him pain, even at only a few months old. We could not bear to watch him suffer, so we returned him and got his livelier brother. I was lucky because that lively boy inspired my golden retriever series.

This book is my attempt to give that first quiet dog the life I wish he'd had. I have no training in dog therapy, so I've researched and talked to trainers. Any errors here are my own.

Thank you to my editor, Randall Klein, and Kelly Nichols, who put together the great cover. And as always, my endless gratitude to Brody and Griffin, whose love inspires me every day, and to my husband, for everything.

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