

Zig Zag is Copyright © Max Black Rabbit. Marvin Badger, Yohni and Esteban are Copyright © James Bruner. Alex O'Whitt is © Tigermark. Jean LeBrun, Gabrielle Ryder, Colton Twain, Kalen Twain-Ryder, Francis Lopez, Charles Lopez, Timothy Bigglesworth-Farthington von Salzburg, Malcolm Grazer, Peter Spermophilus, Miranda Spermophilus, Dina Spermophilus, Miriam Redtail, Fox Jones, Leo Leon, Lizzy Doe-Leon, Nadia Leon, Emma Grey, William White, Steve Wulf, Rajivh Singh, Yashvir Singh and Vishalya Singh is © Joan Jacobsen, 2010. All other characters appearing in this story, except where otherwise specifically noted, are likewise © Joan Jacobsen 2010.

Legal Notice: This story is Copyright © 2010 by Joan Jacobsen. This story may not be sold or used for commercial profit in any form or fashion. This story may not be modified in any way. This story may not be posted on a mirror site or any other Internet site without the written permission of the author. This story may not be distributed on print, magnetic, electrical or optical mediums.

Permission to use characters that are Copyright other individuals was obtained prior to the appearance of said characters.

The author, Joan Jacobsen, hereby asserts moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

This is an independent work of fiction with no connection whatsoever to Max Black Rabbit or James Bruner and is in no way meant to imply any connection with Max Black Rabbit or James Bruner. This story contains characters created by Max Black Rabbit, James Bruner and Tigermark. Events and characters occurring in this story should not be considered part of the storylines created by either Max Black Rabbit, James Bruner or Tigermark. In fact, as far as such storylines are concerned, this story does not exist. The artists disavow any knowledge of and do not officially sanction the events in this story.

IV - Where the hell ...

"What I can't figure out is where in the name of GOD he got that information!"

The lapine was pacing back and forth in front of the window. He was in his mid thirties and casually dressed, with his shirt-sleeves rolled up. His fur was a mixture of black, white and brown and Gabrielle had often mused to herself that seeing him the morning after a truly epic binge would almost certainly guarantee hangovers, even if they weren't there before.

Right now, she didn't feel particularly amused about anything though and she shrugged at the implied question. "I have no idea but why is that important?"

"Mrs. Ryder, it's probably the most important question you have to ask yourself right now," the last fur in the room said. This one a jaguar with a lisp so pronounced, one might think his tongue was about to come loose.

Gabrielle looked at them both in turn. Then she nodded. "Alright. Enlighten me. Why is it so damned important how he got that information. The point I would like to make is that I didn't benefit from that money!"

The jaguar nodded. "You don't have to convince us, Gabby. First of all we work for you, and secondly, we've seen your home."

"What's that supposed to mean!?"

"Gabby ... please, relax," the hare said and made a calming gesture with his paws. He looked quite worried. The bronco looked about to explode. "All Guy meant was we've both seen your home and while it's a great place and one I'd happily trade you for any day of the week, it's not an eight million dollar home, now is it?"

The jaguar nodded hurriedly. He didn't like the look on Gabrielle's face, and besides, the hare had guessed what he meant exactly. "It's just what Chris is saying ... honestly Mrs. Ryder, that's precisely what I meant!"

Gabrielle relaxed a little and nodded. "I'm sorry. I'm too defensive."

"Considering the rabbit he just pulled out of his hat ... " the jaguar started, then glanced at the hare and gulped. "Sorry ... bad choice of words."

The hare shook his head. "It's okay. I agree. It's only natural that you're on the defensive right now. But we're here to help you right this. And the reason why it's so important that you find out where he's got his information from is ... well ... imagine what happens if you go out tomorrow and say "It's just not true, he's just out to slander me". He's got evidence on his side. You did get that check and you've even admitted that much to us. If you want to win this, you have to do more than refute his claim that you benefited from your father's crimes. You have to also somehow make him appear suspect for even having that information."

Rubbing her face, Gabrielle nodded slowly. "That makes sense in a twisted kind of way. But I still think I should say something early on so this won't be allowed to fester."

"Naturally," Guy-the-lisping-jaguar said and flicked through some papers on the table in front of him. "We need to get you set up for an interview ... and fast ... and with someone who is either friendly or at least someone who goes softly on those he or she interviews."

"I'll get working on a statement right away then, but I'll need some information from you," Chris-the-multicolored-hare said and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I'll make a list of things I need to know and you'll have it in two hours. If you could get me the information by tonight, that'd be a great help. Tomorrow will do otherwise."

"Sure. What should I do in the meantime?" Gabrielle asked. "Go home?"

"Actually yes. And don't answer any journalists calling to get a statement until tomorrow. Have your wife answer the phone and make her say you're not available for anyone short of the president of the United States."

"I could do without meeting him to be honest," Gabrielle mumbled. "I've never liked his policies."

Guy smiled crookedly. "That's why we work for you, Mrs. Ryder ... and not the other candidate."

Despite the gravity of the situation, Gabrielle couldn't help but smile.

###

When Yashvir called the family gathering, Vishalya was already suspicious. He had sounded way too pleased with himself and knowing what he found pleasing and the kind of thing that usually put him in a good mood, she entered the living room with a sense of foreboding.

She sat down and crossed her legs, smoothing her sari down carefully while waiting for everyone to get settled. It was just the family present. The servants had all been dismissed, which told Vishalya that whatever her brother wanted to say, was something he didn't want spread all over town within half an hour. At least she appreciated that kind of caution in him. The servants were nice enough furs, insofar as she actually knew them at least, but some of them did have a tendency to *talk*. In that most unfortunate manner which led to rumors, and rumors, of course, were damnable beasts to slay once they had been born.

Her parents were there. They looked like neither of them knew what was going on either. That was not exactly reassuring.

Yashvir entered from the study and closed the door behind him. He crossed the living room and checked that no one listened by the door on the other side. Satisfied that everything was as he wanted it to be, he closed that door as well and turned to face his family.

"I have very good news," he said and smiled.

It was the kind of smile that made his sister want to run for her life. An equine was not supposed to be able to look that predatory. It just flew in the face of nature, but Vishalya would swear any oath that her brother could scare a retrogressing tiger when he smiled like that.

She didn't have time to think about it. Her father's response shocked her thoroughly and put her off her guard for a moment.

"Good. We could certainly use some good news," he said, sighing.

Vishalya was confused. Very much so, in fact. She had no idea that anything was amiss in any way, but her father's voice had been desperately tired.

"What is it?" her mother asked, and Vishalya found herself nodding to her brother for him to continue as well.

Yashvir adjusted his suit slightly and smiled crookedly. "Oh, I believe I have found the solution to our financial difficulties," he said with a smug look of self-satisfaction spreading all over his face.

It nearly made Vishalya's heart drop into her hooves to hear him say that. That made absolutely no sense to her. Hadn't her father brought her to the United States on his excursion to make new business contacts and hadn't that trip been a major success? If that was the case, then how could there be financial trouble in the family?

Something was going on ... something was all wrong, but she couldn't figure out what it was.

"Then please tell us," she said. "Because I for one had no idea we had fallen on hard times."

Her father shook his head. "I didn't think it was necessary to worry you. But we've been the target of a very significant embezzlement, Vishalya. I know who did it ... it was one of our accountants ... but he has long since made off with the wealth. I have no doubt that money has long since been deposited in various Cayfur Island banks. Even if the police should be so lucky as to catch him, we'd probably never get the money back."

Shaking her head, Vishalya looked between her father and her brother in anger. They should have told her! How dare they keep something like this from her? "How bad is it?" she asked, controlling her voice tightly.

"It's very bad," Yashvir answered and shrugged. "It is bad enough that unless we found a way out, we faced a choice between downsizing the company and selling off almost sixty percent of the family holdings simply to cover our losses, or find new investors. Fortunately for us all, I have found that investor."

"What is his price then?" Vishalya asked. No one in the world of big business helped out anyone unless they got something in return.

"My loyalty, as head of the board of directors, with him in the background holding the real control ... and to make sure I don't rebel against his decisions, he wants you to marry his son when he comes home from his studies," Yashvir said and smiled that oily, self-righteous smile again.

The bottom fell out of Vishalya's world. "*What?*" she demanded and got to her hooves. "You made that decision without involving me in it on *any* level whatsoever?"

Her brother shrugged. "It is for the good of the family. Frankly, I don't see that you've got all that much choice," he said, matter-of-factly. "Besides, this means you will have to talk to that *American* male you ran into while over there. As far as I'm concerned, that's just an added bonus."

He had practically sneered the word "American" and he looked at her in a way that made Vishalya wanted to claw his eyes out. She narrowed her eyes. "Who is it, then? This fur you *sold* me to?"

"Vishalya ... " her father began. He looked very sad and his voice was quite upset.

"NO!" she snapped. "This is Yashvir's way of imposing his filthy world-view on the rest of us. This is *his* way of making me bow to his will, because he knows I disapprove of his opinions!"

Yashvir simply smiled. "Nothing of the sort, sister. I simply offered Mr. Sharma an asset this family still has left, to rectify a desperate situation for all of us. *Surely*, you don't want Father and Mother to lose everything?"

Vishalya straightened her back and walked straight up to her brother. "You'll have to force me, Yashvir. And you know what that means! Paishacha vivah, Yashvir. *Paishacha vivah!!!*"

Then she strode out of the room. Behind her, she could hear her mother gasping in shock. She could hear her father falling back into his seat, heavily. And she could hear Yashvir's angry reply.

"You'll change your tune, sister! You do not have a choice in this!"

She didn't answer him.

###

Steve looked at the reporter and smiled. She asked him a question and he simply kept smiling. She tried reiterating her question, and still, Steve simply smiled. Finally, she tried asking another question and when Steve just continued to smile, she sighed and shook her head.

"That's not a very mature attitude, Mr. Wulf," she said.

Steve smiled.

"Did the kaht get your tongue? Come on, I need this interview!" she tried.

Steve, predictably, smiled.

Jessica Greystone groaned and rolled her eyes. Steve was leaning against his car, smiling that annoying smile at her, but he hadn't spoken a single word yet. Not a word. Nothing she could go with.

"Look, everyone following the team knows about your recent loss, Mr. Wulf. Please? I promise I'll make it a good interview!" she tried, almost pleading.

Steve's eyes shot lightning, but the smile never left his lips.

Jessica swallowed and realized that had probably been the wrong road to go down. "Don't you think you're being a little selfish? Some of us have to make an honest living here," she moped.

Steve smiled and reached down to open the door to his car. He got in and drove away, still smiling although the rest of his face spoke volumes of his disgust at the journalist. He had barely gotten off the parking lot before he picked up the phone and speed dialed a number. Then he put it down in the holder on the dashboard and kept his eyes on the road.

"Yes Steve, what can I do for you?" the voice of his coach said as the phone connected.

Steve turned a corner and gritted his teeth. It felt like his jaw was cramping from putting on that smile. "Guess who waited for me by my car, Coach?"

"Miss Furryverse? The Ghost of Christmas Past?"

"Jessica Greystone from Sports of Today."

"You didn't talk to her I take it?" the coach asked.

"Of course not. I smiled at her ... at length, in fact. Didn't say a word. She mentioned my mother," Steve said, finding it hard to keep his anger out of his voice.

"She must have a death-wish."

"Coach Ramsey, if I hadn't gotten into my car at that very moment and driven away, I would've had to go to court on charges of aggravated assault!"

"That's what I meant. So, what can I help you with?" Coach Ramsey replied, rather dryly.

"Get the bitch off my back!" Steve growled.

"I'll try but this is Sports of Today we're talking about. They're not exactly open to rational arguments."

"I know. But thanks for trying at least."

"No problem. See you for practice tomorrow, Steve."

"Sure. See you then."

Steve hung up and turned another corner. He was fuming, but it wouldn't do him any good to rant and rage about it any more. He needed to calm down and forget the journalist. Hopefully, Coach Ramsey would be able to get her off his case. Hopefully.

He drove through Fargo by his usual route, not really thinking much about it. He was looking forward to the weekend. Nadia would be there then. He hadn't seen her since the funeral and he missed her. But that was how the ball bounced. She had her studies to attend, and he had a football career to look after. When she got her degree, things would be different. Then they could think about more permanent arrangements at last.

Permanent both in terms of a place to live together, and in terms of getting married. They both wanted to, but they had long since agreed that it was better to wait until things were a bit more settled. Being married yet living several states apart was not exactly what they had in mind. Nadia's dad would no doubt want to get her a job in the family business, but the great thing about information technology and communications being what they were, was that Nadia would easily be able to live in Fargo and still work full time for her dad in Seattle. She could attend every meeting necessary from the comfort of her own living room and when her actual attendance was absolutely required, that could be arranged too.

Steve knew what an awesome father-in-law he was getting in Leo Leon. Not to mention an equally awesome mother-in-law.

Maybe he could get his in-laws to drop by his dad. No doubt seeing old friends like that would help cheer him up a bit.

Steve nodded to himself. He'd get a hold of Nadia's parents once he got home and ask them if they could be convinced to either go visit his father, or if they could invite him out west for a while.

Yeah ... that'd work.

And then he'd invite his dad up to Fargo for a few days too. Take him to a game, maybe ...

Nodding to himself again, Steve was already forgetting his run-in with Jessica Greystone.

###

It was early evening and the Castro was noisy as ever. Too noisy, in fact, and Yohni closed the window before coming over to sit down opposite her wife.

"I still think you ought to find out where he lives and conveniently slip me the address," she said and sipped from a cup of tea. "How dare he bring that up? It's not as if you ever kept a penny for yourself!"

Gabrielle sighed. "I know that, but I'm not sure *he* does. And frankly, it'd be my word against his."

"That oughta be good enough for *anyone*!" Yohni protested.

Smiling softly, Gabrielle reached over and caressed her wife's cheek. "You're sweet when you're all idealistic like that, but you *know* that's not the way it works in politics."

"I know," Yohni grumbled and leaned into the caress. "But I can bitch and whine about it anyway!"

Gabrielle chuckled and leaned back in her seat. "Absolutely," she conceded. "Anyway, I've got Guy and Chris looking into it."

Yohni nodded. She knew most of Gabrielle's campaign staff. It consisted of over thirty furs, but Christopher Lapis and Guy Uncia were at the top of the proverbial food-chain

and they were both very professional. Still, there was something that just rubbed her the wrong way about the whole thing. Something was inherently wrong about how that piece of information had come into the possession of Gabrielle's opponent.

The phone rang. She got up and checked the number, then sighed and picked it up. "Yohni speaking."

She waited a moment. "No, she's not available until tomorrow. Call her campaign office in the morning and you'll get all the details. Good night, sir." she said and hung up.

Gabrielle didn't even ask. She looked out the window towards the bay. Her thoughts drifted back in time. Far back.

To what had happened that day in Denver when she'd gotten that check from her father.

She remembered his tone of voice, the look on his face ... everything. She remembered how Marvin, then still pretty much a perfect physical specimen of a male badger, had tackled her father through an antique table to prevent him from hitting her. She remembered how Esteban had knocked out the butler ...

What was that little shit's name again?

Darlington ... that was it. Yes ... Darlington ...

She shook her head ever so slightly. When they had all turned around to leave, she knew that Zig Zag had all but destroyed her father, and she felt no sympathy for him whatsoever. No sympathy or respect of any kind. All Gabrielle could feel was revulsion at those of her father's actions that had led to her even being there in the first place.

If he had simply left her alone, it could have been avoided. But then, could she simply have lived apart from a family she knew was that rotten, in the long run? Could she have kept her knowledge private or would she eventually have gone to the police anyway?

The truth was, she didn't know the answer to those questions. She would probably have wanted to, but she had been afraid. And not without good reason. When her father had died, the average decency of the population of Planet Earth had risen by a small, but nonetheless measurable fraction. He was a murderer, a drug dealer and a general scumbag.

And then she had finally faced him down.

She remembered it clearly, because she still woke up at night sometimes, staring at the ceiling in the darkness ... wondering how she got the courage to do what she did.

All the others were heading out when she turned around and walked back in to face him alone. He had tried to threaten her one last time. And she had simply cut him off.

"I have a copy of the tape too, *dad*," she had said, knowing how much he hated being called that.

She hadn't said anything else for a while. Leaving the message to sink in fully.

"I have a copy of the tape too, *dad*."

With everything that had happened, she knew it would take a moment or two for her father to mentally catch up to the implications of her statement. She had stood there, eyes locked on his, seeing his hatred and rage, futile as it was. He was like an angry baby, kicking and screaming in protestation against the world, to no avail. He was absolutely, completely and utterly beaten, and they had both known it.

"So what?" he had tried.

"Money, *dad*. Lots and lots of money. And if I hear so much as one word of protest about it from you, the first thing I am doing when I get home, is to send copies of that tape to all the furs Zig Zag just mentioned. Every one of them."

He had to swallow his pride. She had done it as much for that reason as for any other. In retrospect, she knew that was the truth, selfish as it might have been. At that precise moment, all those many years ago in Denver, she hadn't done it for Jean ... or for Zig Zag. She had done it to see him hurt. To see him realize just how utterly he had lost her. That his own daughter would blackmail him ... that he had fallen that low.

That it was all lost to him.

Family, honor ... love.

"How much?" he had asked. He had known she meant every word.

It was a sensation of power she had been ashamed to relish ... but she *had* relished it. It made her sick to her stomach, knowing that it was something she had inherited from *him* specifically. That gleeful tingling in her fingertips when she had someone utterly in her power. And that it was the one fur who had ever caused her the most pain and misery only made it all the better.

"I think eight million will suffice for what I need. Not a *word*. Not one, dad!"

He had pulled out his checkbook and written it. Then he had held it out for her to take with every sign of revulsion on his face.

"If this bounces, you know what happens," she had said as she took it.

"It won't bounce. I didn't get to where I am by taking chances like that," he had answered.

Besides, eight million was pocket change to him ... she knew that then and she knew it now.

She had shrugged and looked at it. "Where you are is up to your nostrils in shit. And it's rising."

"I never taught you to be that vulgar!" he had growled and for a moment, Gabrielle had wondered if he would strike her again.

Then she had looked at him, and smiled overbearingly. "No. Imagine that, dad. I had to teach *myself* how to be a nice fur ... vulgarity and all. I'd say "goodbye" ... but I honestly wish nothing good upon you. So I'll settle for a "piss off!"

And then she had turned and walked out of the room. Once outside, she had given Zig Zag the check. It had always been her intentions to do so. She hadn't waited until later and she hadn't regretted it for a split second.

In fact, it had been a relief getting that money out of her paws.

But that didn't explain how that financial record had fallen into the paws of Jason Hartwood. That was the mystery she needed to solve.

She looked back to Yohni. "Honey, who apart from you and me ever see the books from the shop?"

Yohni shrugged. "That's easy. My accountant and the IRS."

"I think we can exclude the IRS as suspects in this, but I know my father's accountant is in jail along with most of the rest of the jerks from back then, and all his records were all impounded by the FBI when they crashed my father's syndicate."

"How did your father escape prosecution, Gabby? I've always wondered about that," Yohni asked.

Gabrielle sighed and felt guilty for a moment. It had been such a sore topic she had never really taken anyone into her confidence about what had happened. Not even Yohni. But she had needed to simply push it aside.

"To be honest ... I expected them to come knocking on our door too," she said, quietly.

Yohni shook her head. "Don't be silly. Your dad tried to abduct you. Even if that's not commonly known, the cops and the feds certainly would be aware of it. And besides, you were never involved in anything illegal."

"I took eight million dirty dollars."

"Possibly dirty. You don't know that. For all you know, that could be money coming from one of your father's legitimate business ventures. He had plenty of those too as I recall."

"He did ... that's true. But some of it would no doubt have been dirty," Gabrielle said and sighed.

Yohni thought hard for a long, long time. She got up and walked around with a frown on her face, her mug in her paw. Gabrielle didn't interrupt her wife's stream of thought, but she couldn't help a certain amount of curiosity. Yohni had almost finished her tea before she finally turned around and looked at Gabrielle again.

"No," she just said.

"No?"

"No, it couldn't have been dirty. And here's why. Your father's crime syndicate was taken apart, piece by piece. It was utterly, totally demolished. It was one of the biggest scoops the FBI has made since ... well ... since ever, really. Every last piece of evidence was turned over, time and time again. Every last shred of data was analyzed. They wanted to make sure this stuck ... which is incidentally also why I wonder how he got off the hook ... "

Gabrielle chuckled. "It's simple. He did the biggest deal in the history of crime. Didn't you ever wonder why my parents lived in such a relatively simple home when we went home to visit them that time my father was dying?"

"I did, yes. I figured that he'd be living on a private island in the Bahamas more or less," Yohni admitted.

"He had retired. Passed on the torch to the fur I was supposed to marry, Jonathan Smythe-Rogers. Then he had cooperated secretly with the feds. Basically, he gave them the whole organization on a silver platter in exchange for going free," Gabrielle explained and finished her tea. She reached out to refill her mug, while her wife chewed on that piece of information.

Yohni's eyes were wider than saucers and her jaw was hanging slightly loose for a moment before she got a grip on herself. "And they went along with that??"

"Do you have any idea how difficult it would have been to do what they did if he hadn't given them everything? They didn't pick apart some of his criminal organization. They took it ALL apart. Even the assets that no one knew about except a select few furs. Everything, Yohni. He gave them everything to go free. He only kept enough "clean" cash to set himself up comfortably, without drawing attention to himself."

Yohni fell backwards onto a chair, staring at her wife. "I had no idea he could be that cynical. Even for him, that's *cold*, Gabby. Don't get me wrong, I have no sympathy for the furs in jail. They *richly* deserve what they got, but he sold them all out?"

"Yep. That's Theodore Bigglesworth-Farthington von Salzburg the Third for you," she said and shook her head. "Selfish to the core, cold and calculating to his dying breath."

"My God ..." Yohni whispered, staring into the last sloshing remains of her tea. "But that only reinforces my theory. You must have gotten money from one of his clean accounts. Otherwise, the feds would have come knocking to confiscate every penny of it!"

Gabrielle looked up. Slowly, she nodded. "You're right. You're *absolutely* right," she said, slowly. "And in fact, I think I can get that confirmed by contacting the feds."

"Almost certainly, yes. But that won't solve all your problems," Yohni went on.

Gabrielle's paw stopped halfway to the phone. Gritting her teeth, she nodded. "No, you're right. There will still be a lot of furs out there who won't be convinced. A lot of furs who ... rightly so ... will wonder if the source of that clean money hadn't originally come about through criminal activities."

"That you may never truly know," Yohni said and put down her mug, moving towards her wife. "But you should still get that information from the feds. Just don't use it until you know how your opponent got the information in the first place."

"He must've paid someone off. He must know someone who followed the investigation ... or one of the agents from back then wants to take a shot at me simply for being my

father's daughter. Though I'd prefer to think our law enforcement is above such pettiness ..."

"You and me both. But that's what Guy and Chris are working on."

Gabrielle nodded. "I'll call the feds tomorrow morning though. See if they can't get me a confirmation that I didn't get dirty money."

Yohni smiled and leaned down to kiss her wife. "Good. No more long faces then?"

"I can't help it. It comes with the species," Gabrielle grinned and kissed Yohni back.

"Bad pony ... no sugar-lump!" the mongoose teased.

"Pony? PONY?" Gabrielle mock-growled and got up. "Oh no you don't. Come here you! I'll have to tickle you until you apologize!"

Yohni, laughing her head off, was already fleeing out of the room, with Gabrielle in hot pursuit.