

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.

IX – Hard to grasp

Esteban sat next to Steve's bed. It was late night. Steve had been asleep when he arrived, and at first, he hadn't been allowed in while the wolf slept. Not until a hospital psychiatrist had passed by and seen him in his state of near-complete emotional collapse had he been allowed in.

He hadn't said a word since sitting down. His paws were shaking and as far as he knew, he hadn't stopped weeping since he set foot in the hospital. Slow tears, running down his face, matting his fur against his skin. Lots ... and lots ... and lots ... of tears.

Not just for Steve. Not just for Nadia. But because he just couldn't take it anymore. All of it.

Steve was his *son*.

Every bit as much as Charles was. Sure, Steve hadn't joined his family until much later, but family was about more than simple genetics. He knew that ... it was a belief so deep seated in him that he'd go to the ends of the Earth to defend it. Steve was his son ... simply because he *was*. There didn't need to be any more explanation to it than that.

And Steve called him "dad", too.

Just like Charles and Frances did.

He knew he wouldn't sleep until he'd had a chance to speak to Steve. But he couldn't leave the room either. He just wanted to sit there and watch his son sleep. Watch him be safe. Hurt ... but safe from further harm.

Steve's sheer size always boggled Esteban. Wolves almost always grew to fantastically tall, well muscled individuals, but Steve was a prime example of his species. Standing tall, he was seven feet four inches tall and he weighed in at two hundred and seventy pounds ... of raw bone, muscle and power. He was a gigantic powerhouse of strength ... and gentility, intelligence and kindness. It was almost laughable to think that Steve had ever been a bully, using his size and strength to cajole and intimidate others.

It just didn't make any kind of sense.

Everyone loved Steve ... everyone who met him and got to know him.

And despite that, he had remained grounded. He and Kalen ... they had been good at keeping each other from growing too big for their britches, as Gabrielle had once put it.

But she was right. That was exactly what they had done for each other.

Esteban tried to wipe his face dry and he choked back a cough. He loved his children.

All three of them.

Jean was gone ... and he still had to be a father to them. He had to find that strength, but he needed the world to stop beating him down.

###

"What I want to know is whether you encouraged her in any way," Yashvir said, angrily. He wasn't shouting, but he wasn't doing anything to hide his gross displeasure either.

Talikha was starting to resent her son's attempts to bully his way through life. However, he'd be head of the family soon and he was clearly acting the part. It annoyed her, but she couldn't do much about it ... and sadly, Rajivh wouldn't listen to her about it.

He realized that Yashvir was a loose cannon in many ways, but he was utterly convinced that he would grow with the task. Talikha was not quite so sure. And it surprised her that her normally so business-savvy husband couldn't face the facts.

Regardless, she also knew that Yashvir's plan for saving the family fortunes, while old-fashioned and somewhat distasteful, was almost certainly the only chance left to prevent bankruptcy.

The problem with that, of course, was the "almost"-part.

"I have no idea what you are talking about," she grumbled and picked up a pruning knife from the cobbles next to her. She was crouched by some flowerbeds, trimming the plants. A gardner normally did something like that, but she found it relaxing. Except in this situation, where Yashvir was playing interrogator.

"You'd better be telling me the truth, Mother. I won't be denied because of sentimentality!" the younger equine growled. "She's planning on eloping with that damned American! Well, she won't succeed!"

Talikha had had enough. Her son was behaving like he was the Raja of India and she wouldn't stand for it. "Since when were you ever able to stop your sister from doing anything she wanted?" she snapped, turning her head to look directly at Yashvir.

He bared his teeth in anger and narrowed his eyes. "And just what do you mean by that?"

"That your sister is smarter than you in every way. You're bright, but you've grown into a heartless egomaniac! Your sister, on the other paw, is more than bright. She's *gifted*. And you're using her as your private bargaining chip. You demand answers? Fine, I'll answer. No, I did not encourage her to do this. I tried to tell her that maybe she'd like the husband you've *picked* for her. I tried to support you, despite all my misgivings about what you're doing," Talikha said, coldly staring at her son. She reached out and cut the stem of a rose that was growing crooked, before holding the flower aloft. "See this?"

"How *dare* you?" Yashvir barked.

"*SEE* it?"

"Of course I see it. I'm not blind!"

"Sometimes, I do wonder ..." Talikha muttered, before sniffing the rose. "This flower grows in its own direction. Consequently, it gets more sunlight than the others, bunched together. It grows larger and more beautiful than the rest, because it doesn't grow like all the other roses."

Yashvir smiled cruelly and nodded. "Perhaps that is true, Mother. But you are forgetting something."

"What's that then?"

"You cut it down, because it ruins the perfection of your rosebush by its selfish insistence on growing in another direction than the rest."

Yashvir turned on his hoof and walked away, without looking back at his mother. She in turn sat there, looking at the rose in her paw for a long, long time.

"Yes ..." she muttered to herself. "But this one I'm going to dry, so I can enjoy its beauty for years to come. And all these ... will be gone in a few months, never to return."

She knew her son wouldn't hear it. But that didn't matter ... he wouldn't have paid any attention anyway.

###

Frances looked at her father and tried not to look shocked. She failed completely ... but the fur in front of her was almost unrecognizable. He'd grown old ... almost literally overnight. His eyes looked distant and he was slightly stooped. His paws trembled visibly ... something which they had never done before ... and his mane, of which he had been so proud, was a dishevelled mess.

A grey disheveled mess.

Grey hair in a single night. Frances had heard stories that such things could happen but she had never believed it was possible.

At the moment, he was asleep, and Frances didn't have the heart to wake him. Clearly, he needed the rest. Instead, she tucked the blanket in around him and leaned down and kissed his cheek. Then she turned around and went to find her brother. Steve had been wheeled out of his room to be taken to see Nadia a few minutes before. He'd been scared of her reaction, and Frances was quite worried as well.

Walking along the hospital corridors reminded her why she disliked these places so much. She had that from her mother. Jean had always had a terribly ambivalent relationship with hospitals. On one side, they were places of healing, but on the other, furs came there because they suffered. It was a place of pain and anguish and death as well, and Frances was keenly aware of it. Most disconcerting, however, was the smell. That peculiar, sterile scent that clung to the walls of a hospital and slammed into the faces of visitors the moment they entered. It was a scent without address. It didn't belong to anyone.

When entering someone's home, her nose would immediately tell her who lived there. That scent became associated with that particular fur from then on. But this was a scent

which specifically couldn't be associated with any fur in the world, and that was unnerving.

Finally, she found Charles. He was sitting right outside Nadia's room, apparently waiting for Steve to come back out. He looked like someone who could sleep for a week.

"I'm wondering ..." he mumbled as he saw his sister.

"About what?"

"How to stop the world long enough to get off!"

Frances smiled crookedly and sat down on a chair next to her brother. "Don't you think the rest of us have lost enough furs lately?"

Charles frowned. "Not getting off like *that*."

"I know," Frances said and leaned her head back against the wall. "Sorry ... I'm growing a dark sense of humor these days."

Nodding, Charles looked at the door. "She's not shouting at him. At first I figured that was a good sign, until I remembered that she probably doesn't have the strength to do so."

"I don't think she's going to," Frances said. She didn't quite know why ... it was just a gut feeling.

Charles shrugged and stretched his legs out in front of himself. "My boss called while you were away, tucking dad in," he said.

"What about?"

"Firing me."

She wished it surprised her, but it didn't ... and Frances clenched her eyes shut in exhaustion. "You'll get a new job quickly. You're good at what you do."

Charles nodded and ran a paw through his hair. "I'm not worried about that. I've got two other places lined up where I could probably start on Monday if I asked. That's not the problem."

"So what is, then?"

"I can't really do that until this has all blown over somewhat."

Sighing, Frances nodded and tried to take the conversation onto another topic. "Did you notice Dad's hair?"

"I've been trying not to think about it," Charles said, quietly. "I'm going to get a cup of coffee. Should I bring you one?"

"Yes please ..."

Charles got up and, sticking his paws in his pockets, he shuffled off down the hallway to find some coffee.

###

Leo put down the telephone and smiled grimly. The lawyers were well on their way to having a winning case built against Sports of Today, and soon, the legal machinery would start rolling. He was determined to bury that so-called "paper" under the ruins of its own immorality, and he would bring his entire fortune to bear if needs be. If he failed through the courts, he would start buying the company ... one stock at a time if he had to.

"What's gotten you in such a good mood?" Lizzy asked as she entered the living room of the hotel suite. She was fastening an earring in her left ear, flicking it a little afterwards to make sure the ornament was properly in place.

"Nothing. I'm not smiling because I'm in a good mood. I'm smiling because Sports of Today will be facing its first lawsuit in under a week, m'dear."

"Good. Do what it takes, but *crush* them."

"Lizzy, if I have to spend every dollar I own, I will."

Lizzy nodded and slipped her arm under her husband's. She didn't say anything as they left the suite. In fact, she didn't say another word until they reached the hospital.

###

Nadia was dizzy and she'd already thrown up three times since waking up. Steve was there, and from what she could gather, he was worried she would be angry with him. That made very little sense to her ... even though she knew what had happened to her.

She knew, on an intellectual level, that she had lost her legs. Or more like a leg-and-a-half. She just couldn't grasp the enormity of it yet. It just hadn't really sunk in. What

she did know was that it couldn't be Steve's fault. The last thing she remembered was screaming as a car came towards her. It had been going way too fast. That much she did recall. She also seemed to remember something about her and Steve being on their way somewhere for dinner.

But if that was the case, it wasn't his fault. It was the driver of the other car.

She'd lost her legs.

She'd never walk again.

It just didn't make sense. She couldn't make it add up, mentally.

So the driver of the other car was to blame ... and she had tried to tell Steve that. She'd asked for her mom and dad, too ... but they weren't there yet. Steve had sent them a text message, though, to tell them she was awake and asking for them.

Everything hurt.

She'd lost her legs.

She'd never walk again.

Groaning slightly, she tried to reach out to her boyfriend and he gladly took her paw and held it, gently. She turned her head and looked at him, hoping he could somehow help her understand, but ... how could he?

He was injured too but how badly, she couldn't really tell. He was in a wheelchair, but at least he seemed to have ... to have all his limbs.

She wanted to look, and at the same time, she was terrified of actually moving her blanket aside to look at the stumps. Even bandaged as they were, she couldn't bear it. But a certain morbid curiosity kept telling her to look. To see for herself. That if she'd just look, she'd see and she'd wake up from this nightmare ...

Wake up.

Steve would hold her. She'd get up and walk around, just to make sure her legs still worked.

But at the same time, she knew it wasn't a nightmare. Not this. This was real.

She wanted to understand it. She just didn't know how to begin. So why did Steve think she'd be angry? Right now, she needed him more than ever before, and that was saying something.

"Did ... anyone contact school?" she finally asked, realizing someone needed to let her tutors know she wouldn't be in for classes for a while.

Steve nodded and squeezed her paw again. "Yes. Your mother took care of that," he said, his voice raw. "I'm so sorry ..."

Nadia shook her head a little. She didn't understand. Once the last of the fluff left her mind, it would probably help.

She had lost her legs ...

So why didn't it register ...?

###

"Kale, I need to talk to you," Coach Jones said. He had a very severe look on his face and Kalen didn't like the implications.

"Sure. What did I do?" he asked, trying to keep his tone of voice light-hearted.

The wolverine shook his head. "You didn't do anything," he said. "Or rather, you did a lot, all of it good. But unfortunately, that doesn't seem to register with the ownership."

"I'm being bumped down to second string, I take it?"

"God forbid! But it's not for their lack of trying. No ... it's not that. It's simply that I've got to tell you officially that you'll be off the team next year. Your contract won't be renewed."

Kalen shrugged and felt relieved. "That's okay. We already knew that. I mean, you told me this a while ago."

"Yeah, I know. I just had to bring you the official message. It was either that or you'd have been called in for a meeting," the coach said and shrugged. "I thought it better to spare you the indignity."

"You mean I'd be told to stand to attention while they read me the riot act?"

"I think it's more likely that they would've sat you down in a comfortable chair and pampered you, praising your work ethic to the high heavens, all the while they told you how they thought you were too much of a risk for the team to build on for the future."

Kalen couldn't help a brief, choking laugh. "Thanks then, Coach. I appreciate that you spared me the experience. That would have been awkward to say the least."

"Wouldn't it just? At least you're an unrestricted free agent once the season is over. And with what you've shown on the gridiron, you won't be short on offers."

"Hopefully that's true. But for now, I'm still wearing a Jacksonville uniform, and there are some Dolphins out there in need of a football-lesson, wouldn't you say?" Kalen asked and picked up his helmet.

Coach Jones grinned crookedly. "That's the spirit. But before we go, I need to ask if you're okay. You've taken an inordinate amount of crap from the world in general lately. If you need it, my office door is open, alright?"

Kalen nodded. "Thanks Coach. Is it okay if I come by tomorrow?"

"Of course."

With that, Coach Jones turned around and headed into the tunnel. There was a football game to take care of, but in the depths of his mind, he wondered how Kalen kept himself going. And he wondered whatever the owners of the ballclub had against this talented young equine. Kalen had proved he wasn't going to start bleeding to death on the gridiron after all.

Sighing, he realized he already knew what the problem was.

Owners of major sports franchises generally did not get there by admitting to making mistakes. They got there by being ruthless and seeing that ruthlessness through. Kalen had been drafted on his insistence, using a fifth round pick to get a player whom he believed to be a first or second round talent. He'd taken a lot of flak for it too.

He remembered it clearly.

Even now, when his trust in Kalen was being vindicated week after week, that damned gunshot wound kept being used as an excuse. The lamest excuse around, in fact. The latest version was just mindbogglingly ignorant. Since Kalen hadn't collapsed in a shower of his own blood after throwing a Hail Mary or two, the owners now claimed that while the wound apparently wouldn't reopen, it was the kind of wound which would lead to

problems in a few years time. The damage done to Kalen's muscles and bone structure risked making his arm stiff.

They'd even called in a couple of "experts" to testify to that.

Coach Jones had calmly pointed out that when it came to medical opinions, one could find experts willing to testify that the common cold was the world's greatest killer or that antibiotics were the invention of Satan himself.

What he hadn't told the team was ... that he had known at that very moment, as he had said that, that he too would be looking for a new job after the season ended.

###

Gabrielle looked at her cell-phone, sighing as the results of the game ticked in. Kalen always sent her an update after each game. This one was a loss ... but her son had been his team's best player regardless.

Well, all teams lost games. The question for her was whether she would lose the one she was involved in right now.

"So what you're saying, Mrs. Ryder, is that we should find out where Mrs. Hartwood comes from?" a canid working on her campaign staff asked.

She nodded. "And then let Guy and Christopher know what you find out."

"Okay. She's the real problem then?"

"I don't know if she's a problem as such, but she certainly seemed to have a serious grudge against me, specifically. I want to know where that came from ... and particularly if her family was connected to my father in any way, shape or form."

The canid nodded. "Alright. Anything in particular I should be aware of?"

"I'm not sure if it's any help ... but she did seem to think I had somehow slighted her in the past, and she was either offended or just very surprised that I didn't know how. She was a very spiteful creature, at least."

"It would help a lot if you knew more about your father's criminal empire and how he ran it, Mrs. Ryder, but I think we should all be grateful you actually don't," the canid said with a smile. He tapped a few keys on his keyboard to bring up some search engines to get started.

Gabrielle chuckled. "I guess so. Anyway, make sure Guy and Christopher get told as soon as you find something, eh? I've got a television interview to do."

"Good luck, Mrs. Ryder."

Adjusting her jacket, Gabrielle headed towards the door.

###

The scent of incense was thick in the air and the sound of murmured prayers could be heard behind her as Vishalya left the temple. She had needed guidance and some peace of mind, and as always, spending time before the sacred image of Ganesha had helped her center herself. She had even more reason to pray to Ganesha these days than normal, and it had nothing to do with her brother's vile plans for her future.

Ganesha was, amongst many other things, the patron deity of non-hindus. It was one of the more curious aspects of the faith that there was a god protecting those who didn't believe in him. It was also one of the aspects Vishalya found the most sympathetic.

She left the temple after placing the customary offering of rice and spices on the offering table. Today, she offered cloves and fresh pepper ...

It differed from visit to visit.

She headed into the marketplace outside, adjusting her sari over her shoulder and covering her hair. The scents of the market were fantastic, and the sounds made it a place of wonder. It was such a polyglot place ... even in modern times ... with furs from at least a dozen different minorities, all hawking their wares to potential customers. Some sold cheap, mass produced plastic souvenirs ... others sold quality goods like homespun, home dyed cloth. Or spices. Or tea. One fur sold living poultry, another tried to peddle his homeopathic medicines to anyone who would listen.

Vishalya liked the market ...

The world, presented in such a confined space ... quality and junk, beauty and ugliness, furs of dozens of species ...

She could see a Brahmin ... a holy fur, a sage ... walking calmly through the crowd, wearing distinctive red and yellow robes, occasionally stopping to bless a fur asking for it. She smiled ... only males could be Brahmins, but she greatly respected them. They lived lives of simplicity and poverty, and while there were bad seeds amongst them, most of them were good, honest furs. It had been far worse when she was a child. Almost every

second or at least every third fur claiming to be a Brahmin back then had simply been con-artists, claiming to be able to perform miraculous feats of magic. At a price, of course. A concerted, national effort, government supported but run by private furs, had helped educate furs all over India to be on their guard against such unscrupulous cretins.

With India's emergence as an economic superpower, the general level of education, particularly in rural areas, had skyrocketed, and the con-artists had all but vanished. Brahmins of today were, for the most part, honestly devout furs, devoting their lives to the gods and the quest for spiritual perfection.

Sometimes, she envied them. There were such examples to try to emulate in the vedas.

Stopping by a stall, she smiled to the femme selling small figurines. She spotted one of Ganesha, potbellied and serene-looking, cast in bronze. She asked if she could lift it and take a closer look, and the femme gestured for her to do so. It wasn't large, but it was beautifully made. In the old way ... casting bronze images of the gods in molds broken after one use. Each one was unique. And consequently ... they tended to be fairly expensive. But she didn't mind. This was a very nice piece. It even had a tiny hole in one eyeball as it was supposed to have.

She'd send it to Kalen as a present. Somehow, she knew he'd appreciate it. It was made properly, too. The hole in the eyeball was made in a special ceremony after the figurine had been cast. It enabled the essence of the deity to enter and turn what had, until then, simply been a cold metal figurine into a sacred object.

Nowadays, many such household figurines were shoddy, made by artisans who knew little of their craft, and who did not know how to perform the correct ceremonies. The problem, of course, was that such figurines were much cheaper than the one she was holding, and lots of furs would buy those instead, for that simple reason.

But not this one. This one felt ... right.

Kalen, of all furs, would surely understand the significance.

She asked for a price and laughed softly at what she was told. It was absurdly expensive, but then again, half of the point of visiting a market like this was to haggle, and so she made her offer, just as ridiculous, only on the opposite end of the price-range.

The femme at the stall rolled her eyes and groaned theatrically, proclaiming that she had fifteen children and both parents and grandparents to feed. But she still lowered her price some.

And Vishalya countered ...

Haggling was not the equine's favorite way of doing business, but she knew the game well enough and obliged. Eventually, a final price was reached. It was still a bit high, but Vishalya didn't mind. She paid and left, making her way through the market. She didn't buy anything else. But it felt good to be out of the house and away from Yashvir's stiffling presence.

It made her realize exactly how much she needed to get away from him.

But she had no idea how to.