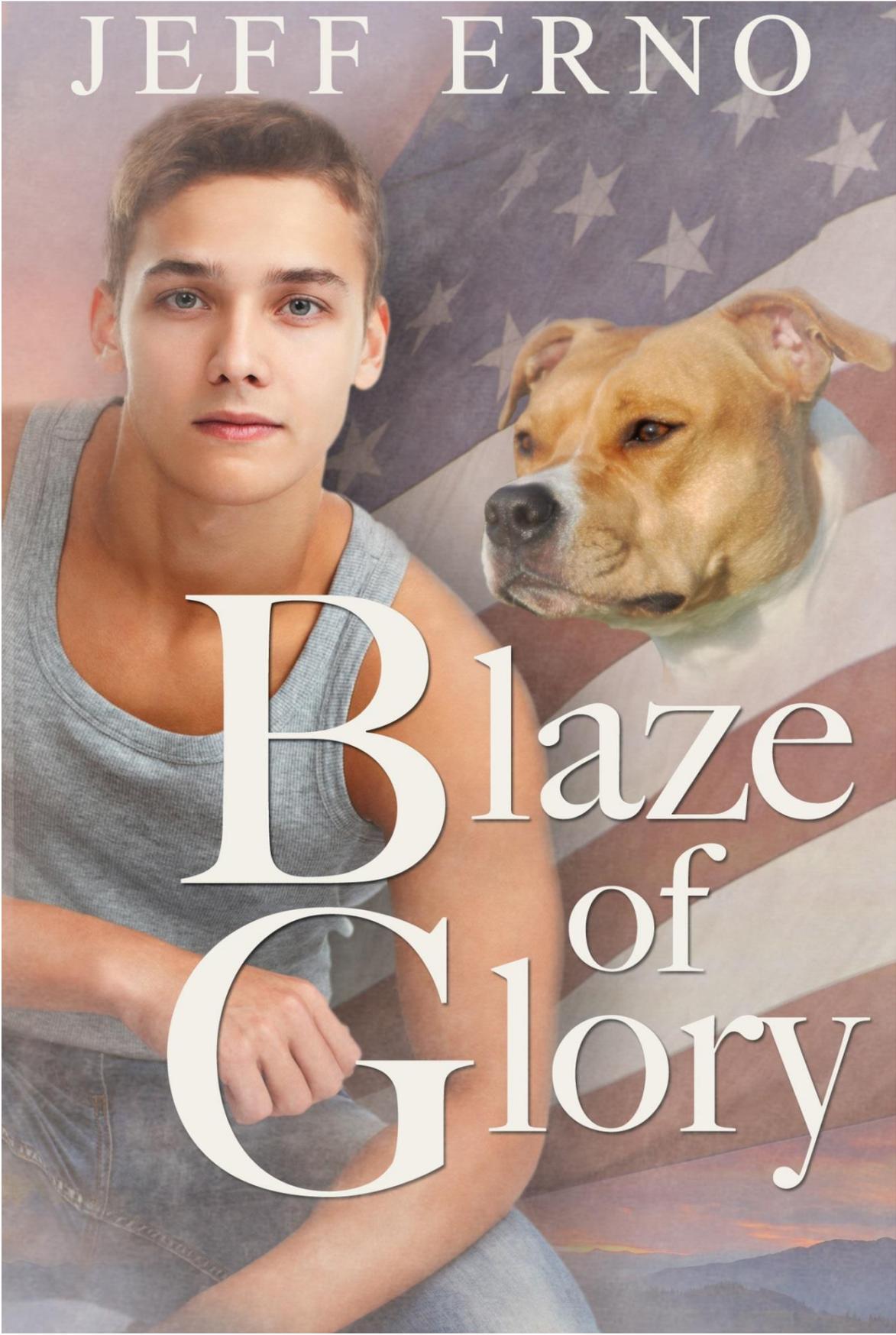


JEFF ERNO

A young man with short brown hair and blue eyes, wearing a grey tank top and blue jeans, sits on the left. To his right is a tan dog with a white chest patch, looking towards the left. The background is a stylized American flag with stars and stripes, set against a sunset or sunrise landscape with mountains.

Blaze
of
Glory



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This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the authors' imagination and used fictitiously.

Dedication:

To my dear friend Traci Delaney who was a great inspiration for this story. She's a dog groomer who lives in northern Michigan, and she owns her own "Groombulance."

And to the readers who have supported me since I made this my career in 2012. Thank you for purchasing and reading my stories. You've helped to make a dream reality for me.

BLAZE OF GLORY

By Jeff Erno

Two more months in the sandbox, and then the tour would be over. Sergeant Jason Bradley counted down the remaining days until freedom, hopeful this tour would be his last. At twenty-three, he yearned for an end of the war so he could begin his life back home in Michigan.

He and the members of his platoon waited in the blistering sun at the border checkpoint, bored out their minds. Same shit, different day— day in and day out. He should be thankful for the monotony. The alternative, of course, could be far worse. But sitting there hours on end became a matter of endurance, and though Marines were trained to handle any situation, doing nothing at times seemed a fate worse than death.

“Shut up, Briggs.” The voice of his closest friend, Corporal Todd Dunham, caught Jason’s attention. Jason spun around to see his marine brother pointing a finger at the chest of one of the shit-for-brains jawas. “That Kevlar Vest ain’t gonna do shit to protect you if you dive on a fuckin’ pineapple. They be scraping you up in pieces and sendin’ you home in a Glad bag.”

The private shook his head defiantly. “Not if I held the grenade in my hands and pinned it under my chest. The Kevlar in the vest would absorb the blast. Yeah, it’d suck ’cause I’d lose my arms, but I’d rather lose my arms than my fuckin’ life.”

“That fuckin’ hillbilly armor ain’t gonna save you. If you get your ass that close to a live grenade, your only hope is to run as fast as you fuckin’ can.”

Jason rolled his eyes as he stepped between them. “Shut up, both of you. Who fuckin’ cares? We’re all double-digit midgets here. In sixty days we’re fuckin’ outta here, and then its FUBIS— fuck you buddy, I’m shipping.”

“I hear that,” Todd said, high-fiving him. “But still, you know I’m right. Those vests ain’t gonna absorb the blast of no pineapple.”

“A helmet, maybe,” Jason opined. “If you fell on the grenade with your helmet underneath you, then you could use the helmet and your vest. Still, I wouldn’t wanna be the one to test that theory. I’ve seen the aftereffects of a grenade explosion.”

Before the others had a chance to respond, a radio call interrupted them. Jason stepped quickly over to his vehicle and picked up the handset. A convoy in the area was under attack, and as Jason received the details, a surge of adrenaline shot through his veins.

“Let’s move!” he shouted, as the marines in his platoon scurried into position, boarding their vehicles and quickly arming themselves. They were only six kilometers from the convoy and would have to serve as backup.

In moments like this, Jason’s training took over and he functioned primarily on autopilot. There wasn’t time for fear or cowardice. You just moved, and you moved fast. Still, the whole scene seemed to transpire in slow motion, and the six kilometers felt more like sixty.

Jason and his two comrades were the first to arrive on the scene, which didn’t appear at all like a firefight. The convoy of military trucks had been halted, blocked by a squad of enemy Jeeps. Two Iraqi vehicles had approached from behind, one a civilian truck with Arabic lettering printed along the side.

Jason drew his weapon and exited his vehicle, then dashed quickly to the rear of the truck. Dunham and Briggs immediately followed. They inched their way along the back of the truck, crouching low, then Jason peered around the side. He saw movement in the side-view mirror. The driver was still inside.

With a movement of his head, he indicated they'd storm the driver, then without hesitation, leapt to his feet and raced around the side of the truck, weapon drawn. His fellow marines flanked him, Todd on his right, when the driver's door flew open.

The driver jumped out and quickly crumpled to his knees, hands raised above his head, babbling something in Arabic Jason didn't understand.

"Grenade!" Briggs shouted, pointing to the explosive in the combatant's hand. The pin had already been removed.

They immediately opened fire, as the soldier hurled the grenade in their direction. There was nowhere to go. They couldn't get far enough away to avoid the blast, and before Jason could respond, Todd lunged toward the already-triggered explosive. He pulled off his helmet and dove atop the grenade, pinning it beneath him, and not even a second later, it detonated.

"Todd, no!" Jason screamed, rushing toward him. He was too late, as he held his arms up to shield himself from the debris, flesh and metal spraying around him. "Fuck! Fuck!" he screamed, sliding to his knees beside his friend.

Grabbing Todd by the shoulders, he flipped him onto his back, and the sight he observed revolted him. His best friend's torso was now hamburger, horrendously mangled beyond recognition, and his arms— they were no more!

"Medic!" Jason screamed. He turned to Briggs. "Call for a fucking medic!"

He grabbed hold of Todd and pulled his bloody body against his own, cradling it, then stared down into his best friend's face. His eyes were wide, glassy, and the corners of his mouth curled up just slightly.

"See," he whispered, "you were right, as usual."

Jason felt the life of his friend drain from his body as he held him, rocking him back and forth, and then he began to scream. Every fiber of his being ached with unspeakable grief and anguish as he cried out.

"No! Todd, you stupid motherfucker! You can't leave me!"

The firefight had erupted around them, but Jason didn't move. Still kneeling, he held his comrade in his arms and cradled his bloody body. "No! No! No!" he screamed.

Startled and disoriented, he felt an oddly warm sensation on his face. Opening his eyes, he looked up into the eyes of another face. Blaze, his Staffordshire terrier, was atop him, nudging him with her nose, lapping at his cheek.

"Blaze," he cried, reaching up to her. His hands trembled as he began to pet her. She'd done her job, had awakened him from his dream— the recurring nightmare that played in his head like a video. Jason's body was now drenched with sweat, and as he sat up in the bed, Blaze laid her head in his lap.

"Thank you, Blaze," he whispered. "Good girl." He affectionately petted her head as he tried clearing his own.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

When Jason returned from Iraq, he was determined not to be one of those vets who succumbed to post-traumatic stress. He wanted to put the horrors of the war behind him and simply get on with his life. The things he'd witnessed, the losses he'd suffered, had been horrendous, but war was hell. He'd known going in that it would be no picnic. He'd known, as every marine knows, that service included placing your life on the line for your country. They'd all faced the same risks, and Jason knew it could have easily been his body blown to bits on the battlefield.

He'd made it through his tour; he'd done his duty. Now it was time to honor his Marine brothers by getting on with his own life and living it to the fullest. Sadly, his

determination proved insufficient. His resolve to man-up and press onward wasn't enough for him to overcome the demons that haunted him.

The symptoms of PTSD did not immediately rear their ugly heads. The process had been gradual, and at first, he didn't allow them to interfere with his daily life. In the beginning, he noticed an edginess sometimes when he was home alone. Little things like entering a dark room triggered a sense of dread and fear, but he quickly brushed those feelings aside and dismissed them as childish. He was a fucking Marine, for God's sake, and Marines were not afraid of the dark.

But when the dread and fear started to paralyze him, Jason decided that maybe it wouldn't hurt for him to see a counselor. He contacted the Veteran's Administration and added his name to their waiting list. Upon discharge from service, he'd been promised access to mental health services if he needed them, but he'd never anticipated they'd be necessary. After putting off the inevitable as long as possible, he finally made the call, but was then told it would be at least four months before they could get him in. The receptionist he spoke with asked if it was an emergency.

"No, I guess not," he said. He wasn't having a complete meltdown or anything. He wasn't suicidal or homicidal, and he was still able to make it into work every day. He'd just have to wait.

Then the nightmares started.

Reliving the horrors of war in his dreams did not at first cripple Jason, but the dreams proved to have a cumulative effect. When the night terrors became so commonplace that he began to fear falling asleep, he found himself staying awake all night. Then when he did at last drift into REM sleep, the nightmares were even worse than before, and their aftereffects traumatized him for hours afterward.

His boss, Rick, had eagerly rehired him when he returned from the war. Jason had worked at the garage before joining the Marines and served as a sort of apprentice to Rick. But after 9/11, when Jason had watched his country brought to its knees by terrorist attacks, he knew he had to serve. He knew it in his core—his gut—and it became like a calling to him. Rick had supported Jason's decision to enlist and promised that when he returned, his job would be waiting.

But three months after his homecoming, Jason started missing work. His absences weren't on purpose. It was just that he'd sit up all night, afraid of falling asleep and facing another nightmare. Often just before dawn he'd finally doze off, and sure enough, the dreams would seize his mind. He awakened soaked in sweat, shaking, and terrorized. How could he explain this? How could he call his boss and tell him he wasn't feeling brave enough to step outside the front door of his apartment?

Rick was an upstanding guy, a pretty decent boss. The first two call-ins he took in stride, disappointed but not pissed. By the third incident, his patience had grown thin. He called Jason into the office to discuss the situation.

"Man, I'm sorry," Jason said as he leaned forward in his chair. "I just had a bug or something. The flu, maybe."

"Jason," Rick said, clasping his hands together on the desk in front of him, "you gotta be straight with me, man. I don't wanna let you go over something like this. You're one of my best workers, but even the best mechanic in the world does me no good if he don't show up for work."

"I know," Jason said, nodding. "It won't happen again. I promise."

"Jason, what's going on? Were you out partying? Hungover?"

He shook his head. "No, man. You know I wouldn't do you like that. If I'm gonna play, you know I always pay the piper. I wouldn't call off because of a hangover."

"Then what is it? I know you didn't have the flu."

Jason shrugged. Rick had always been able to see right through him. He'd known Jason's family since Jason was in grade school.

"You know you can tell me anything, right? Remember when you told me about yourself... about your being... ya know?"

"Gay," Jason said, raising the corners of his mouth slightly. "Yeah, I remember. You said it was no big deal; it didn't matter."

"And it don't. I don't give a rat's ass about that sort of thing. Like I said, you're one of my best mechanics. The point is you can trust me. If you're goin' through some shit, I wanna help."

Jason looked at him, then quickly diverted his gaze, staring down at his own lap. He hated this feeling, this emotionalism that seemed to constantly grip him. He blinked several times and tried to fend off the tears before raising his head to look into his friend's face.

"Something ain't right, Rick. Since I came back, something just ain't right at all."

"What is it, man?" Rick said, pushing his chair back and rising to his feet. He stepped around the desk to stand directly in front of Jason, leaning back against the desk. "Please, trust me."

"I been having dreams and shit. Flashbacks, I think. And I don't know... I can't shake 'em."

"Dude, you're having post-traumatic stress. It's normal. I've watched shows about it on TV. You gotta see a doctor."

"I... uh... I can't. I mean, I know you give us insurance, but I really wanted to see someone at VA."

"Fuck VA," Rick said. "No offense, man, but you can't wait for them. They can take months, sometimes years. I'm gonna call a doctor for you myself, and you're going."

"Rick, please..."

"Jason, I care too much about you, and like I said, you gotta trust me. I'm going to make the appointment, and I'll drive you there myself. Now I want you take the next couple days off..."

"I'd rather work," Jason said. "I can't just sit at home."

Rick took a deep breath. "Okay, but listen to me. You can't just call off sick. You need to communicate with me. If you're too stressed to work, fine. I get that, but if you lie to me and say you got the flu when you don't..."

"I know, man. I shouldn't have lied. It's just embarrassing."

Rick leaned forward and placed his hand on Jason's shoulder. "Don't be embarrassed, man. You have every right to be proud, and what you're going through is some nasty shit. Let us help you through it."

That had been the start of Jason's recovery. What Jason didn't realize was that things were going to get much worse before they got better. He started to become paranoid, freaked out when entering rooms, fearful the enemy was lurking around the corner. One day at work, someone approached him from behind. He hadn't heard them coming and when they spoke, Jason snapped and lunged at the unsuspecting coworker—scared the hell out of him. It scared Jason as well.

He began to see a therapist, a psychologist and psychiatrist named Jeanine Frazier, who specialized in post-traumatic stress disorder. She prescribed Effexor, an antidepressant commonly used in the treatment of PTSD but insisted that the drugs would not cure him. She recommended long-term cognitive behavioral therapy and began weekly counseling sessions.

Jason, who thought life would be a cakewalk when he returned stateside, suddenly found himself in the middle of another battle. The war he waged with the disorder at times seemed far more daunting than his actual field service. Going to the therapy every week did

seem to help, at least somewhat, but his progress was slow. He'd take two steps forward, followed by three steps back. The nightmares continued in spite of the drugs, and he became so paranoid he didn't want to leave his house.

Jason's mom, Carrie, lived not far from his apartment, and at first, he didn't tell her about his problems. He couldn't worry her needlessly. He'd work through it on his own, but when she showed up one day at one o'clock in the afternoon and found him sitting alone in the middle of his filthy apartment wearing only his underwear, she grew instantly concerned.

"Jason, what the hell? I stopped at the garage, and Rick told me you were sick."

Fuck, that probably wasn't all his boss had said. "I'm fine," he lied.

"You're not fine," she said, pushing past him into the living room. "And look at this place. It looks like a tornado blew through. Jason, this isn't like you."

"Mom, would you please stop?" Jason never raised his voice to his mother, but he found himself right on the edge, and he could barely rein in his temper. "Can you just give me some fucking space!" He raised his hands in the air above his head, clenching his fists, then turned away and stormed over to his recliner where he plopped down, still infuriated.

"Honey," she said, her voice cracking. "Please tell me what's wrong. Please let me help."

He raised his head to look at her, tears now streaming down his cheeks. "You can't help me, Mom. No one can. I think... I think I'm losing my mind."

She closed the distance between them and dropped to her knees beside his chair, wrapping an arm around his shoulder. She pulled his head against her chest and lovingly stroked the side of his face. "Baby, you're not going crazy. You have a disorder, and it can be treated."

"That's what they say," he whispered. "But the drugs..."

"They don't always work," she said. "There are a lot of different medicines, and some work better than others on different clients."

Apparently Rick *had* talked to her. She obviously knew about his situation. "Honey, why don't you come back home for a while? Let me help you."

"Mom, I can't do that. I can't give up my apartment... that would really kill me."

"Not permanently. We'll still keep the apartment, and when you're ready, you can move back. You can just stay with me for a few days or weeks, however long you need."

Reluctantly, Jason agreed. He packed a few of his things and followed his mother home, and surprisingly, her company did seem to help, at least for a while. Over the course of the weeks that followed, Doctor Frazier tried a different medication, this time Paxil. It had worked extremely well for some patients, she explained, but for others it had adverse effects. Some patients became suicidal while on the drug, so she insisted that they carefully monitor his progress.

"Jason's been in therapy for months now," his mother said. He'd allowed her to accompany him to his appointment because she wanted to talk to the doctor. "Why isn't he getting better?"

"It takes time," the doctor said. "And not all patients respond well to therapy or the drugs. A lot of it is trial and error."

"Look," Carrie said, angrily pointing at the doctor, "this is my son you're talking about. There is no room for error!"

"Mom, it's okay," Jason said.

"It's *not* okay," she spat. "Jason served our country! He laid his life on the line, and now he's suffering."

"Mrs. Bradley—"

"Ms. Murphy," she corrected the doctor. "Bradley was my ex-husband's last name."

“Ms. Murphy, you have every right to be angry. I hear what you’re saying, and believe me, I understand your frustration. There is another type of therapy we haven’t yet discussed, something I think might very well benefit Jason.”

“What is it?” His mom leaned forward in her chair. “Anything... just tell us.”

The doctor placed her hands together, making a steeple with her fingertips. “Well, I think Jason may well benefit from having a service dog.”

“A service dog?” Jason asked. “You mean like a seeing eye dog? I’m not blind.”

“There’s an organization that specifically trains dogs to work with patients who have PTSD.”

“I don’t understand,” Carrie said. “What could a dog possibly do?”

“Well, these dogs are trained to monitor the mood of the patient. They help the patient with anxiety. They are also trained to perform specific tasks. They monitor the patient while they sleep, and awaken them during nightmares. They are trained to survey rooms for the patient, check them for safety when the patient is too frightened to enter a room alone.”

His mom looked over at the doctor, raising her eyebrows skeptically. “I don’t know.”

“I’ve got some literature,” the doctor said. “And there is a lot of information on the internet. Why don’t you look it over and see what you think? If Jason is interested, I can put him in touch with the organization.”

“But what about the cost?”

“Well, that certainly is a consideration. The training is not cheap. Most patients do fund-raisers.”

“I don’t want a fund-raiser,” Jason said, shaking his head. “I’m not a charity case.”

“Baby, we’ll do a fund-raiser if we need to. That isn’t charity. It’s patriotism!”

Jason looked at his mom and released a frustrated sigh. Arguing with the woman was pointless. He wasn’t sure any of this was even worth his effort. The medicine and the therapy weren’t helping, and he didn’t see how the fuck a dog would make his life any better. But what the hell? He’d go along with it if it was what his mom wanted, if for no other reason than to appease her.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Jason didn’t choose Blaze. As the dog trainers explained it, a human never chooses their own service dog. The dog always has to choose their own human. The trainers did their best to match dogs up with specific humans, selecting animals that had been trained to work with the issues of that particular human, but they had no way of knowing if the dog would accept the human as a partner.

The decision would be made at a special meeting called a “bump”. Jason would go to the training facility and meet with some of the dogs. If one of the dogs chose him, he’d then have to make a decision on whether or not to proceed.

Carrie, true to her word, had quickly rallied support for her son, conducting most of her fundraising efforts online. Within a few weeks, she raised over fifteen thousand dollars, more than enough to proceed with the process of acquiring a service dog.

“How will I know?” Jason asked the trainer as they entered the gymnasium-like training center.

“Oh, the dog will let you know,” Ben, the twenty-something, blond-haired trainer answered. “And once a dog chooses you, providing you agree to the match, we proceed with the training, customizing the services to meet your specific needs.”

What if none of the dogs picked him? Jason wondered. All of a sudden, he felt vulnerable, and the uncomfortable feeling seemed silly. He shouldn't be worried about whether or not a dog liked him, but for some reason, he was.

"If a dog does choose me, how soon until he... or she goes home with me?"

"That depends. Each of the dogs you'll meet with today have already had extensive training. It has taken them anywhere from six months to a year of intense training to get to where they are now. Once they've been matched up with a human, it can be anywhere from two to six months more before they're ready to go home with a client."

"Oh wow."

"Of course, you'll come back here to the facility to work with the dog at least a couple times a week, maybe more. That'll be your choice, depending on how well you've bonded with the dog."

Jason looked across the room to see a door opening on the other side of the floor. A group of trainers entered, each escorting a dog, walking them around the perimeter of the gymnasium floor. Jason marveled at the dogs' postures, how obediently they heeled alongside their trainers. He stood there as the parade of dogs passed, examining each one.

"Wow, they're beautiful," he whispered.

"German shepherds and Staffordshire terriers are the most common breeds we train. Both are traditionally bred as service animals. They're workers," Ben explained. "But truthfully, just about any breed can be trained."

"That one looks like a pit bull," Jason said.

"That's Blaze, and she's a Staffordshire terrier. The breed is a type of pit bull."

"Really? I always thought..."

"That pit bulls were dangerous? It's all about how they're raised," Ben said. "They are one of the most loving, family-oriented breeds. The horror stories you hear are usually cases of animal cruelty, where the dogs have been trained to fight to the death, or where they've been neglected or abused."

"Well, I've got to say, I'd feel safe with a dog like that."

Ben waved to the trainer, motioning for her to bring Blaze over. "Why don't we step over here and have a seat, see how Blaze takes to you."

"Really?" Jason said, somewhat excited. God, she was beautiful.

The trainer walked toward Jason as he took a seat at one of the benches. She leaned down and unhooked the leash from the dog's collar, and Blaze looked up at Jason. Instantly, he was taken by her big brown eyes. He smiled as he held out his hand. She inched closer, sniffed his hand, and allowed him to pet her.

"You're such a beautiful girl," Jason said. She sat beside him and leaned forward, resting her chin against Jason's knee.

"She likes you," Ben said, enthused. He held his hand out to the trainer and retrieved the leash, which he offered to Jason. "Why don't you take her for a walk?"

Jason attached the leash and stood, and the trainer moved to the other side of the dog, walking alongside them as they made their way around the gymnasium floor. The trainer provided specific instructions to Jason, teaching him the basic commands and signals they used during training, but honestly, Jason didn't need much help. Blaze already knew what was expected.

When they got back to the bench where they'd started, Ben suggested they move into one of the training rooms and try some basic scenarios in which Jason and the dog could interact with each other. Jason followed Ben and the trainer down a hallway, Blaze still leashed and walking beside him. When they stepped into the room, Jason was surprised. It looked like an apartment very similar to his own.

"Wow," he observed. "This is quite a setup."

“This is all part of the training,” Ben explained. “We place the dog in a setting that resembles an actual home.”

“You know, I absolutely love these dogs... especially Blaze. But I’ve gotta be honest. I’m not sure what services she’ll be able to provide me other than companionship.”

Ben smiled. “Have a seat,” he motioned toward the sofa. Jason sat down, and was surprised when Blaze climbed onto the couch beside him, then placed her head in his lap.

“Is she supposed to do that?” He thought perhaps the dogs would be trained not to climb onto furniture.

“Oh yes,” Ben said, smiling. “This kind of service dog is trained to bond with its partner emotionally. She’ll learn your behaviors and will sense when you’re stressed. She’ll steer you away from destructive, repetitive behaviors.”

“You mean like pacing the floor or something?”

Ben nodded. “Or any number of other nervous habits that patients with PTSD often exhibit. Even something as benign as nail biting can be detected and interrupted by the service dog. And when you’re stressed, she will provide you affection and companionship.”

“Won’t any dog do that?”

“To a degree,” Ben said, taking a seat in a chair opposite them. “Blaze will also be trained for environmental assessment. If you suffer from anxiety when entering new environments, walking into rooms alone, etcetera, she will go ahead of you and let you know all is safe... or not.”

“Really?”

“She’ll remind you when it’s time to take your medications.”

“Seriously?”

“If you suffer from dreams or hallucinations, she will interrupt you, wake you from your dream, or steer you to safety during a hallucinogenic episode.”

Mouth agape, Jason looked down at the dog. “That’s absolutely amazing. But how do I know if she’s going to pick me?”

Ben smiled. “Oh, she already has.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Just knowing Blaze was going to be his partner lifted Jason’s spirits. When he left the training center that afternoon and headed back to his mother’s house, the excitement bubbled up inside him. He couldn’t wait to get back to his own apartment and start living life again.

“You need to slow down,” his mom said as she entered his bedroom. He had a suitcase on the bed and was stuffing it with his clothes.

“Mom, I’m fine, and it’ll be great once I have Blaze.”

“That might not be for another two or three months... or longer,” she reminded him. “I think you should just stay here until they’ve completed the training.”

“I don’t need a babysitter,” he said, turning away from her.

“Jason, please...”

“Mom, I can’t live here forever. I have to get on with my own life.”

“I know, baby, but two or three months isn’t forever. You’re still having the nightmares, and last night...”

He knew what she was going to say. He’d awakened after another nightmare and was so shaken that he consumed nearly an entire fifth of whiskey. Finally, he passed out on the porch where she found him in the morning. Then he crashed so hard, he almost didn’t wake up in time for his appointment at the training center.

“I’ve gotta get back to a normal life, Mom. I haven’t worked a full week in so long I can’t even remember. It’s a miracle Rick hasn’t fired me.”

“And going back to that apartment by yourself is *not* going to help.”

Discouraged, he sighed. “This isn’t a life. This is a fucking prison!” He picked up one of the belts he’d stuffed into the suitcase and hurled it angrily across the room. Frustrated even more, he grabbed the entire suitcase and flung it off the bed, clothes flying in all directions.

“Jason!” his mom shouted, moving toward him. She grabbed hold of his shoulders.

“I want it to stop!” he cried. “I can’t take it anymore!”

“I know, honey. I know.” She pulled him into her arms and held him tight. He clutched her, wrapping his arms around her delicate frame.

“I’m sorry,” he cried. “I’m so sorry...”

“It’s okay, baby.” She steered him toward the bed where they sat together on the edge of the mattress. “Please, don’t push too hard. I know you don’t see it yet, but you *are* making progress. And once you get Blaze, things will be a lot better.”

“I can’t even go out to the clubs or anything,” he said. “I get too freaked out in the crowds. It don’t make sense. How come I’m brave enough to go off and fight in a war, but I’m too scared to leave my own house?”

“It’s part of the condition, honey. And we’ll work on it, one step at a time.”

“Who’s ever gonna wanna be with someone like me?”

“A big strong Marine with a gorgeous smile and muscular body?” she said. “I can’t imagine anyone wanting someone like that.” She had a way with sarcasm.

“But I’m batshit crazy.”

Her pleasant expression instantly morphed into one far more serious. She stared at him angrily, then raised her hand to point her finger toward his chest. “You listen here, mister. I don’t *ever* wanna hear those words come from your mouth again. You are *not* crazy! You’re a hero! You almost died fighting for this country, and now you’re suffering as a result of it. You better never be ashamed of yourself for what you’ve done.”

“But I didn’t die! Todd did!”

As he said the words, powerful emotion flooded his entire being and an anguished sob erupted. She grabbed hold of him again and pulled him into herself.

“Honey, he did exactly what you would have done, and you know it.”

“I just don’t know why,” Jason said. “Why him and not me?”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

So far, they’d tried Effexor and Paxil, and most recently Zoloft. Jason didn’t feel any of the drugs were actually helping, and in fact, his condition had begun to worsen. He remained at his mother’s house, and it became more and more difficult for him to even go out in public. He had to take a leave of absence from his job, and his mom insisted he apply for disability. As much as he hated the idea of living off government handouts, he had no choice. He had no other source of income.

“Honey, we can’t afford to keep paying rent on that apartment,” his mom said.

“I... uh... I have to force myself to go back to work then.”

“You know you can’t do that, Jason. That’s not even an option, and Rick’s not going to allow you to come back until you’re better.”

They sat across from one another at the kitchen table. “This whole disability thing, it’s like admitting defeat. How can I tell myself I’m going back to work some day and then accept a label that I’m ‘disabled’?”

“Don’t think of it that way.” She reached across the table to take hold of his hand.

“You *have* a disability right now. It doesn’t have to be permanent.”

It felt permanent. Very permanent, and with every day that passed, it seemed to get worse. Jason couldn't stand being around people. At first, it was crowds, but his anxiety worsened, and it got to a point that he felt panicked interacting with just a few people. His doctor prescribed another medication, Xanax.

Although his mother's basement still contained all of Jason's weightlifting equipment, he hardly ever had the energy to work out anymore. He felt like his body was going soft, which seemed appropriate. His brain certainly had softened. His emotions had softened. He'd turned into the kind of weak person he'd always loathed. When he looked into the mirror, he hated his own reflection.

"Once the disability is approved, we can get you back into your own apartment," his mom said, placating him. "There are those units a few blocks from here that are subsidized. They're nice, and the rent is based on income."

"I don't wanna be like this the rest of my life," he mumbled.

"You've got to have faith," she said. "Things will get better. I know they will."

The single thing that did seem to help was the training with Blaze. Jason looked forward to the sessions, and the more time he spent with her, the stronger their bond grew. Most recently, they began dealing with Jason's panic attacks. They taught Blaze to recognize the symptoms and to clear an area of other people when Jason began to panic. She steered people away from him, creating a safe zone.

"How will this work in public?" he asked. "What if people misunderstand?"

"They'll back off," Ben said. "And that's really all you need to be concerned with. She'll clear the way for you to have the space you need until you're calm, on the other side of your panic episode."

Jason shook his head, then smiled. Ben seemed so knowledgeable, and he was really good at his job. "You're really good at this," Jason said.

He shrugged. "Thanks." As he looked into Jason's face and smiled, Jason felt a tug at his heartstrings. He had the most adorable dimples. Ben was about three inches shorter than Jason's six-foot-two inch frame, but he had a nice body— what Jason would call a swimmer's build. And he was blond. Jason had always been partial to blond guys with blue eyes, perhaps because they were his opposite.

Realizing how ridiculous he was being, Jason brushed off the feeling. A guy like Ben would never be interested in someone like him. And for all Jason knew, he was straight. Before Jason could even think about entering the dating world, he had to pull himself together and conquer the demons that plagued him. Undoubtedly a guy who was as "together" as Ben would see Jason as damaged goods. A nutcase. Jason didn't need that kind of condescension and judgment in his life. He'd best keep things strictly professional.

Ben placed his hand on Jason's arm as he continued to gaze into his eyes. "Bud, are you all right?"

"Uh, yeah."

"Hey, I wanted to ask you something," Ben said, "but I'm not sure this is even appropriate."

Jason gulped. "Um, sure. Ask me anything."

Ben reached into his pocket and pulled out a business card, then held it out to Jason. "I'm starting a new business, and I'd appreciate if you'd keep me in mind."

"Oh." Jason looked down at the card and a wave of disappointment washed over him. For a second, he thought Ben was about to proposition him. "Groombulance? What's that?"

Ben laughed. "That's the name of my business. I'm a dog groomer."

"You are? I thought *this* was your job," Jason said, referring to the position at the training center.

“Nah. All this is volunteer. I do it as kind of a community service, ya know? A chance to give back, show my appreciation.”

“Your appreciation?”

“Yeah, to guys like you— the vets. Men and women who fought for our country.”

“Really? I always thought you got paid.”

“There are some paid positions here, but mine isn’t one of them. I’ve had my own pet grooming business for the past three years, and I’ve operated inside one of the local pet stores. But now I’m branching out and going mobile. I bought an ambulance and converted it to a pet grooming vehicle.”

“Seriously?” Jason laughed. “I can’t picture it.”

“I’ll have to show you. I had an inverter installed that allows me to operate all my electric equipment— shavers, blow dryers, fans, etcetera. And it has a big tub and shower, a grooming table with all my equipment, fans and blow dryers. It’s really cool, everything I need all in one spot. And the customers love it. They don’t have to bring their pets out. I just come right to their house.”

“Wow, that’d be perfect, especially for people like me...”

“Who sometimes struggle with leaving their homes. Yes! So anyway, if you’ll just consider me, I’d appreciate it. I’m not sure I should be soliciting business this way, though.”

“Oh my God, I’d be kind of hurt if you didn’t. I mean... well... uh, I don’t know *what* I mean, actually.”

Ben laughed. “No, I get what you’re saying. I feel like we’ve sort of bonded too. This whole process is really intense, and I feel like we’ve developed a friendship.”

“Yeah, me too. And I’ll definitely hire you to do all of Blaze’s grooming. But what exactly is she gonna need?”

“Well, she’ll need to be bathed regularly, and a dog with a coat like hers requires a double bath. And she’ll need her nails trimmed and her paws will need to be moisturized.”

Jason cracked up. “No way.”

“Way!” Ben said. “Well, I guess the moisturizing is optional.”

“Well, I think it’ll be nice to pamper her. It’ll be like her spa day.”

“Exactly!” Ben said enthusiastically. “And it’ll give me an excuse to see her handler.”

“Her handler?”

Ben placed a hand on his hip and stepped back, shaking his head. “*You*, silly. It’ll give me a chance to see *you*.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Jason placed the barbell back into the rack above his head and sat up on the bench. His doctor had been right about the exercise. It seemed to help. He stood up and walked over to the full-length mirror, flexing his bicep. Nothing soft about *that*. He smiled, then thought of Ben.

He hoped Ben would be the one to deliver Blaze to his new apartment. They’d finished with the training, and Jason had signed the lease on his new place. Fortunately, his disability would be going through quickly, thanks to his mother’s persistence. She’d hounded their congressman’s office, urging them to fast track the application. It could be several months before he started getting checks, but he would eventually get them, along with VA benefits.

This was Jason’s chance at a new life, and he didn’t want to blow it. With Blaze’s help, he’d learn to adapt and hopefully overcome some of the symptoms of his disability. He wondered if he’d ever again be “normal”. The doctor had cautioned him not to think in those terms. Take each day one at a time, she said, and gradually he’d improve.

He turned from the mirror and rushed upstairs to hit the shower. Then he'd head over to his new apartment with his mom and wait for Blaze.

"Honey, stop pacing," Carrie said as she sat at the dining room table.

"They should've been here by now."

"They said eleven thirty, and it's only twenty after," she said. "Sit down and I'll get you some tea."

He rolled his eyes. "I don't want tea," he said.

The sudden knock on the door caused Jason to jump, startling him. He froze in his tracks and looked over at his mother.

"That's probably them," she said cheerfully, and rose to her feet.

"Mom, wait!" he said, holding out both hands. "What if it's someone else?"

"Just let me check, okay? I'll look through the peephole."

Jason took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. He had to remind himself the apprehension was part of his disorder, but that knowledge alone did not lessen his anxiety. He watched as his mom stepped over to the door and peered through the peephole. "It's them," she said, then smiled. She stepped back and opened the door.

The fear that had gripped Jason instantly dissipated when he saw Ben standing on the threshold, Blaze at his side.

"Blaze!" Jason said, moving closer. He lowered himself to a crouching position as Ben unhooked the dog's leash. She rushed over to him, wagging her tail, as Jason hugged and petted her.

He raised his head to look up at Ben's smiling face. "Sorry, we're a few minutes early."

"You're fine," Jason said. "Better early than late."

He glanced at his mom who was smiling broadly. "Come on in," she said to Ben. "Would you like some iced tea?"

"That'd be awesome," he said, "but first I think we should give Blaze the grand tour."

Jason led Blaze through each room of the apartment, and when he got to the bedroom, plopped down on the bed and sprawled out. He called for Blaze to join him on the bed, and she eagerly leapt up onto the mattress. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close, snuggling with her. As he looked up, Ben stood in the doorway, smiling.

"She'll be just perfect for you," he said, taking a step closer.

"I can't thank you enough," Jason said, propping himself up with one arm. He stared up into Ben's smiling face. "This is a new beginning for both of us— Blaze and me."

Ben nodded.

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His first few nights in the new apartment went well. Having Blaze at his side provided Jason a sense of security and companionship, and it eased the anxiety that had for so long overwhelmed him. But as he began to settle into his daily routine, the novelty wore off and reality began to sink in.

His life was a failure. *He* was a failure. At twenty-four years old, he couldn't hold down a job or even leave his own apartment. He wasn't a man anymore. This disorder had crippled him, stolen every shred of his dignity. The depression engulfed him, and though Blaze's presence empowered him enough to function, he couldn't shake the funk that seized his very being.

Once a day, Jason and Blaze went for a long walk, usually ending at his mother's house. He continued with his workouts in the basement gym, hoping the exercise would help

lift his spirits. And his mom frequently checked on him, took him grocery shopping, and sometimes brought him food she'd prepared.

The myriad friendships Jason had back in high school had all fallen away. Even the few gay guys he knew from the clubs, back before he'd gotten sick, no longer bothered to call. The only people he interacted with were a few acquaintances online, avatars who posed no real threat. He could shut them down with the click of a mouse when he needed to.

Blaze did her job. She reminded Jason when it was time for his meds. She sensed his anxiety and stayed close when he needed her security. When he cried out in the dead of night, seized once more by another horrible flashback, she was there for him. She even walked from room to room, assessing them for Jason's safety when he felt too panicked to move.

They became best friends, and Blaze knew him better than any human ever could. She sensed everything Jason felt, and unlike people, she didn't try to fix him. She accepted him as he was and loved him all the more. And Jason loved her. God, how he loved her.

But the hole within his heart, the aching sense of grief and despair, just wouldn't go away. As much as he loved his mom and appreciated all she'd done for him, he couldn't stand to continue using her. He couldn't bear the thought he'd become a burden, and worst of all, he couldn't understand why he'd been the one to survive when so many other brave Marines had lost their lives.

He followed Blaze to the kitchen and retrieved a tall glass of water. "Yeah, I know," he told her. "Time for meds." He removed the pill bottles from the window ledge above the sink and carried them back to the living room along with his water, then took a seat in the recliner. Blaze sat at his feet.

"I'm sorry, Blaze. You know how much I love you." He twisted off the childproof cap from the bottle of Xanax and poured the pills out onto the end table beside his chair. Then he did the same with the Zoloft, creating a pile of medication. He added the leftover Paxil, reasoning every little bit would help. He'd create for himself a drug cocktail that would finally make all the horror go away. The guilt, the sadness, the shame. He just wanted it all to end, once and for all, because he wasn't strong enough to go on like this anymore.

Tears streamed down his cheeks as he reached over to the stand. Placing one hand palm-up level with the tabletop, he used his other to scoop the big pile of medication into his palm. He then took a deep breath and leaned back in his chair, finally raising his clenched hand to his mouth. He closed his eyes as his mouth opened, but before he could pour the pills onto his tongue, something stopped him.

Blaze's jaw clamped securely around his wrist, not hard enough to break the skin, but firmly enough to prevent him from continuing. "Blaze, what're you doing?" She jerked backward, snapping her neck back and tugging Jason's arm away from his body. "Dammit!" he cried as his fist unclenched and the pills flew across the room, all over the carpeting.

Blaze released his hand and lunged onto his lap. "God dammit! Blaze, oh Blaze! Why'd the fuck you do *that*?" Tears streamed down his cheeks as he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her tightly to his chest.

He leaned back in the recliner, raising the footrest so he could stretch out, and fell asleep with Blaze snuggled in his arms. She'd stopped him, saved his life, just as Todd had done on the battlefield.

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When he heard the ringtone of his cell phone, he almost didn't bother to answer. The only person who ever called was his mother, and he wasn't sure he wanted to talk. He sighed and picked up the phone. It was Ben! He'd added his number to his contacts weeks ago when Ben had given Jason his card, and now he was calling.

“Blaze, it’s Ben!” he said, holding up the phone.

She looked up at him, cocking her head to the side as if to say, *Then answer it, stupid.*

He laughed and pressed the button. “Hello?”

“Someone’s in a good mood,” Ben said in response to Jason’s laughter.

“Sorry, Blaze was being silly.”

“That’s why I’m calling,” Ben said. “Wanted to check on her, see how she was doing. You think she’s ready for some grooming?”

Jason looked down at her as she stared up at him expectantly. “Oh, I think so. I know she’ll love seeing you.”

“Good, ’cause I’m outside in the parking lot.”

“You are?”

“Yeah, so get your ass down here.” He paused before adding, “Or I could come up and get her.”

“No, no. We’ll come down. Just give me a sec.”

“Okay, see you in a minute.”

Jason stepped over to the door and removed Blaze’s leash from the hook on the wall. “You wanna go see Ben?” he asked. “He’s gonna give you a bath.”

Blaze looked up, wagging her tail, as she waited by the door.

Jason had to smile when he pushed through the exit door of the apartment building and spotted the Groombulance. It was so cool, a full-sized ambulance that looked exactly like any other functioning emergency vehicle. The only difference was that it bore the logo of Ben’s business on the side panels and had paw print decals.

“This is awesome,” Jason said as they approached. “Do the lights and sirens work?”

Ben stepped toward them, smiling. “The siren does, but I’ve never used it... while driving.”

Jason laughed. “This is pretty wild. How’d you come up with the idea?”

He shrugged. “I didn’t at first envision an ambulance, but I had the idea of some sort of mobile grooming vehicle. When I started looking at vans and trucks, I came across this baby and said *why not?* I got it used for six thousand bucks. Come on, let me show you.”

He walked Jason and Blaze around to the passenger side of the vehicle and opened the side door, then led the way inside. Blaze followed, leading the way for Jason. “Wow, this is cool.” Just as Ben had described, the interior contained everything a dog groomer would need. “It’s much roomier inside than I expected,” he said.

“You know, I started with twenty-three customers, and now I have over two hundred.”

“That’s amazing. If you keep up at that rate, you’ll have to expand.”

“I know, but there’s just one of me.” He stepped to the rear of the vehicle and began to gather supplies as Jason took a seat in a chair by the door. Jason watched Ben, his pulse quickening as Ben bent over in front of him. Wow, he looked incredible in those khakis, the way the fabric stretched across his bubble butt.

“So, how’s everything going with Blaze?” he asked.

“Oh, she’s doing great. Aren’t ya, girl?” Jason reached down to pet his dog. “She’s everything I’d hoped she’d be and more. She’s...” he stared into her big brown eyes... “my best friend.”

“What about you?” Ben said, turning around to face him. “How’re *you* doing?”

“Good,” he lied. “I’m doing super.”

Ben moved closer and took a seat beside him. “Are you sure?”

Jason suddenly felt uncomfortable, exposed perhaps. “Uh, yeah.”

“Well, if you ever need to talk, you can always call me.” He reached down and placed his hand on Jason’s knee. “I’m a pretty good listener.”

The touch ignited something within Jason, and he suddenly felt all tingly. He looked into Ben's eyes and smiled, and oddly enough, he believed him to be sincere. "Thank you," Jason said, his voice barely a whisper.

"Okay, down to business! Wanna help me get Blaze up in the tub?"

Blaze, as well-trained as she was, fully cooperated as they lifted her into the metal tub. Ben used a hand-held showerhead to hose her down, then lathered her up with shampoo.

"I'll first give her a normal bath with shampoo, then bathe her a second time with conditioner."

"How'd you learn how to do all this?" Jason asked.

"I took training courses and became certified. They're offered at the community college."

"So you don't have a degree or anything?"

Ben smiled. "Nope."

His question must've sounded pretentious, and Jason could have kicked himself for blurting it out. "I mean, that's cool. I just wondered. I don't have a degree either. I went right into the Marines out of high school."

"You gonna go back to school? You could probably use your GI Bill, right?"

"Yeah, I could, but I don't know. I'm not sure I'm ready."

"Maybe online classes?"

"Well, I had a pretty good job as a mechanic. I'd like to someday go back to that."

"Wow," Ben said. "How manly."

Jason laughed.

"Well, to be honest, it doesn't surprise me. Everything about you is manly."

Jason stared at him, wide-eyed, unsure how to respond.

"Did I just say that out loud?" Ben said.

"It's cool," Jason said. "I had to be in the closet when I was in the Corps. Don't Ask, Don't Tell, ya know? But I'm free now."

Ben smiled broadly as he turned to look Jason directly in the face. "Really?"

"Have you been... um..."

"Flirting?"

Jason nodded.

"Not on purpose, but sometimes I can't help myself."

Jason shifted in his seat then took a deep breath. "I haven't dated or anything since... uh..."

"Since the onset of your symptoms." Ben's expression sobered.

Jason looked down at the floor and nodded. "Kinda hard to date someone when you never leave the house."

"Well, maybe you need to look for someone who's willing to come to you," Ben suggested.

Jason laughed. "What kind of relationship would that be, and who'd want that?"

"I don't know," Ben said as he picked up the spray nozzle again and began rinsing Blaze. "Maybe someone who sees what an awesome guy you are and is willing to accept your challenges."

"Challenges," Jason repeated. "That's a nice way of saying I'm crazy."

"Dude, you're not crazy." He stopped spraying and turned again to face Jason. "Don't say shit like that about yourself."

"You sound like my mother."

"Good, 'cause she seems like an awesome lady," he said, then resumed the bathing.

When he finished rinsing Blaze, he laid out a blanket-sized towel on the floor and lifted her from the tub. "Oh yeah, her's a big girl," he said, straining.

Jason grinned. "Don't hurt yourself," he cautioned. "I could've helped, ya know."
"Oh, I'm used to doing all this by myself. And believe me, Blaze is not the biggest dog I have. You should see me handle a Great Dane."

"Oh my God, I can't imagine."

"I usually put the dogs in a cage and then turn on the dryers, but Blaze is so well trained, I think she'll be okay sitting right here. I can do her nails while she dries."

He then shifted some things around and set up two large fans on either side of the dog. "They look like fans," he said, "but they're heaters. I just put them on low because, believe me, they get pretty warm."

Ben then took a seat on the floor in front of Blaze, crossing his legs in front of himself. The childlike position in which he was seated seemed cute, and Jason smiled.

"Why don't you come over for dinner sometime?" he blurted out, then instantly regretted it. He had no idea where that even came from, how he'd mustered the courage, but he'd said it. Before he could take back the invitation, Ben responded.

"I'd love it!" He looked up and smiled.

"Really?"

"Of course," he said. "I thought you'd never ask."

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"Blaze, I'm not a good enough cook to have a guy like Ben over for dinner." He paced back and forth across the kitchen, running his hands over the top of his crew cut. "What am I gonna do?" He looked down at Blaze, as if she could answer.

"Right! Of course, why didn't I think of that? I'll do steaks on the grill! But you know what that means? We've gotta go shopping."

Blaze continued to stare up at him, mouth slightly open with her tongue hanging out just slightly.

"Just you and me. Think we can do it?"

The expression on her face said yes, so Jason took a deep breath, then headed for the bedroom to grab his wallet.

He'd gone shopping several times with his mom, and they usually went late in the evening when the store wasn't crowded. If he started to feel panic, he'd go outside. He wouldn't be able to do that this time. He couldn't just abandon a shopping cart in the middle of the aisle.

He fitted Blaze with her service harness and attached the leash. "You ready, girl?" he asked, and they headed out the door. Driving wasn't particularly a challenge, as long as he stayed calm, and the grocery store wasn't far away.

When they got to the store, he walked through the entrance door, Blaze at his side, and immediately felt the eyes of multiple strangers. Of course they'd stare. They weren't used to seeing a dog inside a place of business, and they probably wondered why he needed a service dog when he wasn't blind. He squared his shoulders and took a deep breath. "We're gonna ignore them," he whispered to Blaze.

He made his way up and down each aisle, looking for the items he knew he'd need for the barbeque. "Marinade," he said to himself. "What aisle?"

He looked overhead at the signs, hoping to find some help in his search. "Maybe it's in the ketchup aisle," he said to Blaze.

Just then a lady and two children rounded the corner of the aisle and one of the kids, a boy about the age of four or five began to shout, "Look at the doggie!"

The children rushed up, immediately followed by their mother who'd abandoned her cart. "Can we pet her?" she said.

Before Jason could answer, another customer approached from behind. “She’s so beautiful. Are you her trainer? Is she a seeing eye dog?”

Then another customer came toward them, head on.

Blaze immediately moved into action as she began to circle Jason, moving back and forth, avoiding the outstretched hands of the small children. She rapidly paced back and forth, making it impossible for the onlookers to get any closer as Jason felt his entire body stiffen. He took deep breaths and closed his eyes, willing them to just back off— just go away!

When he heard the commotion die down, he opened his eyes and realized he and Blaze were alone in the aisle. All the people had moved on, a couple now down a ways from him at the other end of the aisle. They looked up to glance in his direction, obviously confused by what had happened, but Jason didn’t care. Blaze had done her job, and he hadn’t gone into a complete panic.

“Good girl!” he said, crouching down to pet her on the head. “Thank you, baby.”

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When Jason heard the knock on his apartment door, he panicked, but it wasn’t due to the PTSD. It was an entirely different kind of panic.

“He’s here!” he said to Blaze in a stage whisper. “It’s Ben!”

He rushed over to the mirror and checked his appearance one last time as Blaze moved to the front door, turning to stare at him expectantly. “I’m coming,” he said, annoyed, then shook his head.

After one more deep breath, he flung the door open to see Ben’s smiling face.

“Right on time,” Jason said, smiling. Ben held out a box, and Jason looked down to see it was chocolates. “You brought me chocolate?”

“Well, I was gonna bring a bottle of wine, but I wasn’t sure about alcohol.”

“Oh, right. Yeah, with the meds... but a glass of wine would’ve probably been cool.”

He placed his hand on Ben’s shoulder and guided him inside. “I’m not much of a cook, so I’m grilling steaks. They’re already out on the barbeque.” He motioned toward the patio.

“Oh cool. You’re a meat eater.”

Jason laughed. “Do I really look like a vegetarian?” Then it suddenly occurred to him he hadn’t checked with Ben to see if he might be. “Um... do *you* eat meat?”

“As much as I can get,” he said, laughing.

“Um... awesome. ’Cause I got a big piece of meat for you.” He felt his cheeks grow warm as he realized what he’d said. Ben laughed.

Jason motioned for Ben to have a seat at the dining room table. “Everything should be about ready. There’s soda and water in the fridge if you wanna help yourself while I go get the... uh... meat.”

“Cool,” Ben said.

Jason had made a salad, baked potatoes, and rib eye steaks. As he brought the platter back into the dining room, Ben took a seat at the table, which had already been set.

“Wow, this is killer,” Ben said. “And you said you weren’t a good cook.”

“Well, you might wanna wait till you taste it before you start complimenting me.” He placed the platter on the table and took his seat across from Ben. “Most of what I cook comes from a box or the freezer.”

“Then you’ve definitely outdone yourself.” Ben began to dish up the salad and handed a bowl to Jason.

“Did you have a lot of customers today?” Jason said, trying to make small talk.

“I had six,” Ben said. “Supposed to be seven, but I had to reschedule one.”

“I hope not on my account.”

He shook his head. “Nah, on account of the ambulance. The engine started smoking, and I was afraid...”

“It started smoking?”

“Yeah. I’m not sure what the problem was, but the gauges didn’t indicate it was overheated.”

“Did you smell anything? Like, did it seem like burnt rubber?”

“Yeah, actually, it did.”

“A belt, it sounds like.”

“Oh. Well, I let it cool off, and when it stopped smoking, I drove it straight home. I’m gonna try to get it into the garage in the morning.”

Jason raised his eyebrows. “Well, I’m a mechanic, ya know. Maybe I could...” And then he realized he’d probably overstepped his bounds. Of course, Ben would not entrust him with something like working on his vehicle. Jason wasn’t stable enough, and Ben probably thought he’d freak out or something, totally fuck everything up.

“Really?” Ben said. “You could look at it for me?”

“Uh... I mean, if you want...”

“I don’t want to take advantage—”

“Take advantage? You mean like I did of you when you groomed Blaze and you wouldn’t let me pay you?”

“No... um, that was different.”

“How?” He stabbed his fork into a big piece of lettuce.

“Um... give me a minute to think.”

Jason laughed. “So after we eat, we’ll go over to your place and I’ll look at the Groombulance for you.”

“This is supposed to be our date,” Ben protested.

“How come our date can’t include fixing your ambulance?”

Ben shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess you’re right. As long as we’re together, it’s still a date. And this steak is awesome!”

“You’re supposed to eat the salad first,” Jason said, then winked.

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“Yup, here’s your problem,” Jason said. “You’re gonna need a new belt.”

“Wow,” Ben said, craning his neck to look down into the engine where Jason was pointing. “Is that serious?”

Jason grinned. “We’ll get ya fixed up. We’ve gotta go to the auto parts store, though.”

“Oh, I don’t think they’re open.”

“Not this time of night, but instead of taking it to the garage in the morning, we’ll go get the parts and I’ll fix it.”

“Jason, that’s too much.”

“You’re always doing nice things for other people, but you won’t let anyone return the favor.”

“I didn’t do much,” Ben protested. “I just gave Blaze a bath. Big deal.”

“And you donate all your time at the training center. And you’ve checked on me.”

“But that’s because...” His voice trailed off.

“Why?” Standing in front of the ambulance with the hood open, he turned to Ben and looked him in the eye. “Because why?”

“Because I had ulterior motives,” he said. “I... uh... I...”

“I wanna kiss you,” Jason blurted out, then grabbed hold of Ben’s shoulders and pulled him closer. “I wanna kiss you so fucking bad.”

“Then what are you fucking waiting for?”

“I don’t fucking know!”

Ben reached up and grabbed hold of the sides of Jason’s face and pulled him downward, planting a searing kiss on his lips. Jason responded by wrapping his arms around the smaller man and pulling him tight, passionately kissing him back.

When they pulled apart, Ben looked up at him seriously. “That’s why,” he said. “That’s why I’ve been so nice to you.”

Jason smiled. “Dog grooming ain’t the only thing you’re an expert at.”

Blaze, who was standing beside them, looked up and barked her approval.

Jason turned to her and smiled. “Yeah, he *is* a pretty good kisser.”

They held hands on the drive back to Jason’s apartment as a plethora of thoughts and fears flooded Jason’s mind. What was he doing? Why was he letting himself get involved with this guy when he knew there could be no future?

Just a kiss. Just a first date, he told himself.

But what if it could be more? He and Ben had shared a connection, and Jason knew this a long time ago. Yet he’d been too frightened to act. Just like with everything else in his life, he felt paralyzed.

“You okay?” Ben said. He sat in the driver’s seat, steering one-handed. “I didn’t come on too strong?”

“This is so crazy,” Jason said, turning to stare out the window. “When I was younger, back before... ya know... the war, I was always the more aggressive one. I wasn’t shy about asking someone out, making the first move. But now...”

“You know, it’s human nature to fear rejection,” Ben said. “If you only knew how much courage it took for me to give you my card.”

“I don’t know if I can be for you the kind of guy you’d want.”

“How do you know what kind of guy I want?” Ben said, a defensive edge in his voice. “I happen to think you’re exactly the kind I want. You’re smart and brave and strong. And you’re a nice person, a generous person.”

“What if I never get over this? What if I’m a prisoner in my own house the rest of my life?”

“You’re already getting over it, Jason! Look at you. Look where you’re at right now. You’re in a car with me on our first date. You’re not locked up inside your apartment, and you’re not having a panic attack.”

“I thought I was going to, though.”

“So? That’s all the more reason to be proud of your accomplishment. You faced your fear. And you told me at dinner you’d gone shopping alone. Jason, this journey is not made in huge leaps but much more in baby steps. Sometimes you’ll find yourself just barely inching along. You can’t get discouraged. You just have to keep moving forward, no matter how slow or how difficult it seems.”

Jason’s heartbeat quickened as Ben squeezed his hand. Everything about the guy made Jason feel better. Just being with him sent a shiver of excitement through Jason’s body. He was a wonderful person with an amazing personality, but he also was very attractive. When they’d kissed, Jason had become instantly aroused, and now sitting beside him, holding his hand, Jason again was turned on.

When Ben pulled into the parking lot, Jason wondered if he’d just drop him off or stay a little while longer. He parked the car and killed the engine, and Jason heaved a sigh of relief. “You’re coming in, right?”

Ben smiled. “Sure.”

“How about we have that glass of wine?” Jason offered, once inside.

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I bought a bottle when I got groceries— just in case.”

Ben entered the living room and sat down on the loveseat while Jason got them drinks from the kitchen. When he returned, Blaze was sitting beside Ben with her head in his lap.

“Hey, you stole my seat,” Jason scolded her. She looked up, then somewhat reluctantly climbed down from the cushion onto the floor. Jason slid in beside Ben and handed him his glass.

Jason took a sip of his wine, then placed the glass on the stand beside him. He felt his heart pound rapidly in his chest as he inhaled the nutty scent of Ben’s cologne. He slid his hand down onto Ben’s thigh and felt a tightening in his own groin.

“You’re not the only one who was trying to muster the courage to ask me out,” he said.

“There’s someone else?” Ben leaned back as he turned to look at Jason.

“No, no! I mean... no, I mean I was also trying to muster the courage to ask *you* out.”

“Oh,” Ben smiled.

Jason leaned a little closer. Their lips seemed to move together as if drawn by magnetic force, and soon Jason was enveloped once more in a passionate, earth-shattering kiss. He closed his eyes and allowed himself to be swept away as Ben reached up to press his fingertips against Jason’s chest.

Jason ran his hand through Ben’s hair as he continued to devour him, darting his tongue into Ben’s welcoming mouth. Ben slid his hand downward, slowly crossing Jason’s abdomen and finding his lap. He moaned when Ben pressed against his steel-hard erection.

“Can we go to the bedroom?” Jason asked. Ben nodded.

Jason stood and took Ben by the hand, leading the way down the hallway to the bedroom while Blaze followed. Once inside, Jason guided Ben to the bed and sat with him on the edge of the mattress. Their lips found each other’s again, and they once more kissed as Jason reached for the tail of Ben’s shirt. They parted long enough for Jason to pull the shirt over Ben’s head, after which Jason immediately brushed his fingertips across the golden skin of Ben’s smooth chest.

“You’re beautiful,” he whispered, burying his face into the crook of Ben’s neck while simultaneously tweaking one of his nipples. Ben moaned and tossed his head back. Jason steered him downward on the bed, then slid off the mattress to position himself between Ben’s outstretched legs. He reached for the button of Ben’s pants, unfastened them, and tugged the khakis downward, over Ben’s thighs.

Jason’s heart beat a little faster as he stared down at the obvious bulge in front of him. Ben wore tight-fitting boxer briefs, and the outline of his throbbing cock enticed Jason to continue. He leaned forward and pressed his lips against the stretched fabric, breathing warm air onto the already steaming hot hard-on.

Unable to wait a second longer, Jason took hold of the waistband of the shorts and pulled them down, discarding them behind him on the floor, then grabbed hold of the beautiful erection. As he pulled it toward his mouth, a pearl of precum oozed from the slit, and he darted his tongue out to lap it up. He looked up at Ben, smiling.

“Oh my God,” Ben whispered.

Jason wrapped his lips around the bulbous head and slid his mouth around Ben’s cock, pressing his tongue against the sensitive frenulum. Ben elicited a barely audible whimper as Jason slid all the way down the shaft, taking the entirety of his cock down to the root.

The feel of Ben's soft touch, when he raked his fingers over the top of Jason's short hair, encouraged him to continue. He slid back up the shaft, then back down, slowly starting to bob. Ben moaned as Jason continued, excited himself and fully aroused.

"Oh God, you're gonna make me come," Ben warned.

Jason pulled back and looked up at him, smiling broadly.

"I want you to make love to me," Ben pleaded.

Jason wanted it too, but was it too soon?

"Please," Ben said. "I've wanted it for so long."

Jason pushed himself up from the mattress and stepped closer. Ben reached out with both hands and took hold of the waistband of his jeans. He unbuttoned them and pulled open the fly, reaching inside to find Jason's arousal. Jason's breath caught in his throat as Ben pumped his shaft.

"Nice," Ben whispered, staring at Jason's impressive package.

He took hold of the tail of his shirt and pulled it over his head, exposing his muscled chest, and Ben stared up at him, awestruck. Ben pulled down Jason's pants and underwear, then assisted him as Jason stepped out of them. Now completely naked before his lover, Jason moved in closer once more, pressing his body against Ben's as they began to passionately kiss.

They repositioned themselves on the mattress, rolling around, all the while caressing each other. Jason explored Ben's body with his fingertips and mouth, worshiping it, bathing it with tender kisses.

When at last Ben was beneath him with his head on one of the pillows, Jason looked down into his big blue eyes. "Do you want me inside you?"

"Yes," Ben pleaded.

Jason leaned off the bed and opened a drawer in the bedside stand. He removed a condom packet and lube and set them on the mattress. He slid back on his knees between Ben's legs and picked up the lube. Ben spread his legs wide as Jason applied the gel to his fingers. He slid one finger into the tight hole and began rotating his digit. Ben moaned as Jason's finger slid deeper inside him. He then added a second lubed digit, but did not proceed further until Ben felt relaxed.

Ben picked up the condom pack and tore it open, leaning forward between his own legs to position it onto the tip of Jason's cock. He rolled it down as Jason watched, smiling. Jason applied lube and pumped his shaft a couple times, then slid closer on the mattress. He used his biceps to press against Ben's ankles as he raised his legs into the air. Aligning his cock with Ben's hole, he eased into the pucker. The warm sensation surrounded his cockhead as he watched Ben's face.

Ben bit his bottom lip and grabbed hold of the bedding beneath them.

"Baby, you okay?"

Ben took a deep breath and nodded. "Yes. Keep going."

Jason slid in further, and the warmth turned to heat. Ben's tightness felt amazing around his throbbing shaft, and he smiled. Ben let go of the bed sheets and grabbed hold of Jason's waist, urging him on.

Jason began to thrust, slowly at first, but then increasing in speed.

"Fuck me," Ben encouraged. "Please... make love to me."

As Jason rocked his pelvis, pumping his cock in and out, Ben matched his thrusts by grabbing hold of Jason's ass cheeks and pulling him inward. Jason leaned forward, pressing his lips against Ben's mouth, kissing passionately as he remained inside his lover.

Jason felt the throb of Ben's raging hard-on against his abs as he continued to thrust in and out, until at last Ben tossed his head back and moaned, "I'm gonna come! Oh God! Yes!"

A warm spray erupted from his cock, splashing against Jason's abdomen and chest as he continued to stab his cock deep inside him, literally fucking the cum right out of him. "Oh yeah," Jason said, his voice breathy. "So close. Oh God! Yeah!"

He at last felt himself cross the precipice, that incomparable point of no return. He cried out, squinting his eyes tightly shut while lightning coursed through him, causing him to convulse. The orgasm ripped through his body and his load erupted deep inside Ben's body. His sphincter tightened around Jason's steel-hard cock, milking out every last drop of hot cum.

Gasping he collapsed on top of Ben, kissing him again, even more passionately. He pulled his arms back to allow Ben to lower his legs and wrap them tightly around Jason's waist. They rolled onto their sides, still kissing as Jason slowly slid out of his lover.

"Spend the night," he whispered.

Ben looked into his eyes and nodded. "I don't ever want to leave."

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"Oh yeah, that's a nice tight fit," Jason said.

"That's because you're so huge," Ben replied.

Jason turned to him and smiled. "I'm talking about the fan belt."

"Oh," Ben said, grinning. "That too."

"Why don't you and Blaze ride with me today?" Ben suggested. "You can wait in the cab while I'm dealing with the customers, then join me in the back while I do the grooming."

"I don't know," Jason said, thinking about it. "I'm not sure how the other dogs will react to Blaze."

"If there's a problem, she can stay in the cab. It's air conditioned."

The cab was roomy, and there was actually plenty of space for Blaze to lie on the floor between the seats. But to be honest, Jason wasn't really all that worried about Blaze. He was more concerned about himself and how he'd do in public for an entire day.

"It won't even be like being in public," Ben said, as if reading his mind. "You won't have to interact with anyone unless you want to."

"And I'll get to spend the whole day with you."

"Exactly, and we'll have the entire back of the ambulance to do whatever we want in."

Jason raised his eyebrows. "*Whatever* we want?"

"*Whatever* we want." Ben winked.

"Okay," Jason said.

The night before had been wonderful, and Ben had stayed the whole time, sleeping with Jason and Blaze in his bed. They'd snuggled together, and Jason hadn't even had any nightmares.

But he wasn't naïve enough to believe that would always be the case. Although Ben knew about all Jason's symptoms, he'd yet to witness him actually having a panic attack or recovering from a horrific nightmare.

How would Ben cope with it when it happened? Christ, how would he cope himself? His fear of freaking Ben out was almost worse than the fear which gripped him during a panic episode.

Yet he'd allowed himself to trust Ben the night before. He'd gone out on a limb and had done something that really terrified him, and look how it had turned out. If he hadn't allowed Ben into his home and into his life, he wouldn't even be here now. He'd still be in his prison— alone and frightened.

The first client of the day was a poodle named Misty. Jason instructed Blaze to remain inside the cab of the truck, which was completely separate from the rear compartment, although a small window separated the sections.

The grooming process was different than it had been with Blaze. Jason took a seat and watched as Ben placed the small dog on a table in the center of the cabin. He used canvas straps to secure the dog in place. They served as a harness, restricting her mobility. She didn't fuss much, to Jason's surprise, but just stood there while Ben trimmed her hair. He used both scissors and clippers, and Jason marveled at how quickly and skillfully he groomed her. After the haircut was complete, he bathed her, dried her, then trimmed her nails. At the very end, he placed a bow in her hair.

"Wow," Jason said, "you did all that in less than forty minutes."

"Good," Ben said with a satisfactory nod. "That means we're still on schedule."

After the third dog, Ben suggested that they get some lunch. "Why don't we just get takeout somewhere and go down to the park? There's a dog run where we can walk Blaze."

"Cool," Jason said. It sounded perfect.

They stopped and got burgers at a drive through, and the attendant who took their order was exceptionally friendly. "I get that a lot," Ben explained. "People don't see the company logo on the side, and they think I'm an actual ambulance."

Jason laughed. "Well, you can give me CPR if you want."

When they got to the park, they climbed out of the cab and made their way to a nearby picnic table. "Let me walk Blaze real quick," Jason said. He headed off down the trail, certain Blaze was more than ready to relieve herself.

As they walked along the trail, they rounded a corner, and the picnic area was no longer in sight. Jason looked up, and just ahead of them stood a group of people. It looked to be about five guys, all college-aged, huddled together talking. Jason froze in his tracks.

Two of the guys broke from the group and stepped toward him. Jason felt his heart rate quicken. He took a deep breath.

"Hey, man, this is a private party," one of them said.

Jason opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out.

"Dude, you deaf or something? Get lost!" The guy speaking was about Jason's height, also muscular with multiple tattoos on his arms. He wore dark sunglasses and a bandana on his head.

Blaze immediately stepped between them.

The man stopped and looked down at the dog. "Call off your mutt," he said.

Blaze peeled back her lips, baring her teeth, and growled. The man took a step back.

Another guy from the group stepped forward, pulling something from his back pocket. He flicked his wrist and a switchblade opened. Jason stared at it as the sun glinted off the blade. The drumbeat of his heart echoed in his head.

"Grenade!"

It all came back to him, flooding his memory and overtaking every one of senses. He wasn't alone. The enemy surrounded him, and Briggs was to his left screaming that horrible, fateful warning.

"Grenade!"

He began to tremble as the world faded around him. All he could see was desert sand and bursts of gunfire. "Todd, no! No! Please Todd!"

Jason crumpled to his knees, releasing Blaze's leash as he covered his face with both hands, sobbing.

Seconds later, he heard footsteps— someone running toward him. He raised his arms defensively to fend them off, but arms surrounded him, pulling him tightly into an embrace.

"Jason, it's me. It's Ben! You're okay. You're okay. You're right here with me."

Jason gasped for air and clutched his friend, pulling Ben's body against his own. "You didn't have to do it, man! You didn't have to sacrifice yourself. It should have been me. It should have fucking been me!"

Eventually his heartbeat slowed and he opened his eyes to discover he wasn't in Iraq. He wasn't in the middle of the fucking desert but was here in the park with Ben and Blaze. She nuzzled herself next to him, licking his face and he reached out for her.

"Blaze scared them off," Ben said. "I don't know who they were. Maybe it was a drug deal or something, but one of 'em had a knife."

Jason's hands still trembled as he looked up at Ben.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"You're sorry? Oh baby, don't be sorry. I'm the one who's sorry. I'm the one who brought you here."

Ben helped Jason to his feet and led him back down the trail toward the picnic table.

"Just take me home," Jason said.

"Okay, yes. Of course," Ben said.

"Just take me home... NOW!"

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Jason had turned the ringer off on his phone, but he still noticed when it lit up as a call came through. Ben had called at least a dozen times in the previous three days. Jason had listened to his first few messages but then stopped.

The whole thing had been an awful mistake, and it wasn't fair to Ben. Jason should have never put him in a situation where he'd have to deal with one of his freak-outs. Though Ben repeatedly told him it didn't matter, that it was just another attack he'd made it through, Jason would never be the same around him. Now Ben knew for certain— he'd seen in living color— what a basket case Jason really was.

He'd just move on with his life, him and Blaze. He now had everything he needed. He had his security and his comfortable space. He didn't need a boyfriend. He definitely didn't need love.

Love?

He laughed aloud as he thought about it. How could he even pose the L word at this juncture? Yeah, he and Ben had known each other several months now, but they'd only gone on one date. And they'd only spent one night together. Why would he even consider the word love at this stage?

It didn't matter. It was over, and Jason wouldn't make that same mistake again. He wouldn't allow himself to open up to someone, to trust someone when he knew what the end result would be. He was damaged goods. Period.

The knock on his door startled him, but did not trigger any sort of PTSD response. He knew exactly who it had to be. Since his mom was at work, the only other person who might show up was Ben. He just wouldn't answer. He'd ignore the pounding until he gave up and went away.

At the second knock, Blaze was on her feet, pacing back and forth in front of the door. "No, Blaze," Jason whispered. "Just be quiet, and he'll go away."

Blaze took a step toward him and barked. It wasn't an ordinary bark, either. It was loud, ear-piercing.

"Blaze!" he scolded.

She barked again, three more times, each as loud as the first.

"Dammit!" he said, and pushed himself up from the chair. He took a deep breath and walked over to the door, opening it just slightly.

“Let me in,” Ben said. “Please.”

Jason sighed and stepped back. “Ben...”

“Please, let me talk. Just listen to what I have to say.”

Reluctantly, Jason led him into the living room and took a seat in his recliner. Ben sat a few feet from him on the loveseat while Blaze curled up at Ben’s feet, allowing him to reach down and pet her.

“I want to show you something,” he said.

Jason watched as Ben reached into his jacket pocket and removed two pill bottles.

“These are my medications,” he said.

Jason stared at him quizzically. “You take meds?”

Ben nodded. “I have bipolar disorder, and at one point in my life, I was on full disability.”

“Really?”

“Yes. My mood swings were so bad, I could barely function, and it took a long time to find the right medicine. I’m still not cured. I’ll never be cured, but I can now function.”

“Ben, why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because it doesn’t matter.” Tears welled in his eyes. “Just like it doesn’t matter you have PTSD. They’re conditions! They’re illnesses just like anything else. Would you think any less of me if I had diabetes or cancer or asthma?”

He shook his head. “No.”

“Then why would it be any different with a mental illness?”

“I don’t know,” Jason said, “and you’re right, it doesn’t matter to me. I don’t think less of you.”

“Then why the fuck do you think I care less about you because of your illness?”

A wave of emotion swept over Jason and the tears began to flow. “I don’t know, but people just do. They see me as some sort of freak, some sort of lunatic.”

“You know how I see you, don’t you? I told you. You’re my hero, man! You almost sacrificed your life for our country. You’re the bravest fucking man I know. Look, I’m so sorry about the other day. I never should have let you head down that trail alone. I knew better. That’s *my* fault, not yours!”

“I don’t blame you. Ben, it’s not your fault.”

“Please give me another chance. Please give *us* another chance.” He slid off the sofa onto his knees and crawled over to Jason, stopping right in front of him. “I love you, and I don’t want to lose you.”

Through his tears, Jason smiled. He reached out and placed his hands on each side of Ben’s tear-streaked face. Slowly he nodded. “I think I love you, too. Now more than ever.”

Ben lunged toward him, wrapping him in a fierce hug. They embraced for several moments and then pulled apart. “Let’s try this again,” Jason whispered, and kissed him.

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Five Years Later

“We have a busy day today,” Jason complained. “When I finish up with the transmission on the third truck, I have to install brake pads on number two.”

They now had five Groombulances and six full-time employees. Ben and Jason had expanded the business together, and Jason’s primary job was to maintain the vehicles. Of course, that wasn’t all he did. He also ran errands, manned the phone, and kept Ben organized.

Over the previous five years, he'd learned a lot about Ben's disorder, and in so doing, he'd learned more about himself. He wasn't crazy. He wasn't damaged. He had a chronic, treatable condition. And he'd made tremendous strides in his recovery.

Jason and Ben made strides together, along with Blaze. As Jason's condition improved, Blaze became more like a pet to them than a service dog, but she still was a worker, and they both loved her with all their hearts.

"You have a busy day? You should see my schedule!" Ben retorted.

"I'm the one who wrote your schedule," Jason said, laughing. "You have six customers. Big deal."

"Why don't you take the day off and do the transmission tomorrow?"

"You know I can't."

"I'll blow you in the back of the Groombulance."

"You do that anyway... all the time."

"But I'm gonna miss you."

Jason laughed. "Yeah, and absence makes the heart grow fonder."

"Can I at least have a kiss?"

"Right here? Right out on the sidewalk in front of all these cars that are passing by?"

"Right here," Ben said.

Jason grabbed hold of him and delivered a swoon-inducing kiss, complete with a dip. When he set Ben back on his feet, he looked into his eyes and smiled. "I love you, baby."

"I love you, too."

Blaze stood beside them, barking her approval.

THE END

AUTHOR BIO:

Jeff Erno began writing LGBT fiction in the late 1990s. Although an avid reader and amateur writer from a very young age, Jeff pursued a career as a retail store manager in Northern Michigan. When his first gay-themed novel was published, he was shocked that anyone would even want to read it. Four years later, he writes full time and has published fifteen novels. Jeff now lives in Southern Michigan, where he resides with his pure-white cat, Gandalf.

Jeff's writing credits include a variety of themes and sub-genres including male romance, Young Adult, Science Fiction, erotica, and BDSM. He is the winner of a 2012 Rainbow Award and an Honorable Mention in 2011. His style is unpretentious and focused upon emotionally-driven, character-based stories that touch the heart. Jeff is especially passionate about young adult literature and combating teen bullying and youth suicide.

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