

Sidekick

by Anita Lorene Smith

Jazz Porter sat in the window booth of her favorite restaurant, the Blue Collar Café, for the second time that day. Her German shepherd, Riley, lay at her feet, breathing softly. She had managed to take two bites from her cheeseburger, but she couldn't force any more down. Her fries lay untouched on her plate. Coffee was the only thing that didn't get stuck in her throat.

The big problem confronting Jazz was where she was going to sleep tonight. She had inquired at a couple of shelters downtown, but they wouldn't take her dog. She wouldn't leave Riley outside and more importantly, away from her.

The first time she came into the Blue Collar today, she was more visibly upset, more jumpy. That was understandable. Her apartment building had just been bombed, precisely at 10:17 a.m. Someone had planted plastic explosives, the TV news had reported. She kept thinking that she and Riley could have been inside. Normally, they would have been, but this morning they had gone for a walk to the local grocery store. She had taken her backpack and a light jacket with her. Fortunately, she had also put her drawing pad and a paperback novel into her pack. She was wearing jeans and a hooded sweatshirt. But she would need a blanket if she didn't want to freeze tonight.

Jazz watched the tall, blonde woman working behind the counter, pouring coffee and chatting to a customer. A waiter was wiping tables and refilling salt and paper shakers. At lunchtime, there were three servers on the floor, scurrying back and forth from counter to tables and booths. Now it was past 1 o'clock, and the rush had gone. Jazz saw the blonde woman leave the counter area and head her way. Jazz lowered her head and pretended to be reading the newspaper, but she felt the woman approach.

"Not much of an appetite today, huh?" the woman said.

Jazz shook her head and looked up at her. She was attractive but not in a glamorous way. She wore no makeup and had a few crinkles at the corners of her eyes. Jazz guessed she was in her mid-thirties.

"How about some more coffee?"

"Sure," said Jazz. She had been afraid the woman was going to ask her to leave. She was the new manager, and Jazz didn't even know her name.

As if reading her thoughts, the woman introduced herself. "I'm Rayeh Jackson, Jack's daughter.

"I'm Jazz Porter." She expected Rayeh to tell her to get her dog out of the restaurant. This was the only place she knew of in this part of town that would let Riley lie quietly under the table.

"Nice to meet you." Rayeh peered under the table. "And who is this?"

"This is Riley, and he's really good. Jack—your dad—let him be in here and none of the customers minded." Jazz heard the defensiveness in her own voice. She hadn't meant her tone to come out that way.

Rayeh smiled. "Dad already filled me in on customers' preferences. Don't worry about it, honey."

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Jazz relaxed as much as a homeless person could—a homeless person who didn't know where she was going to sleep tonight.

Rayeh returned to the counter and cleared the dishes of the customers who had just left. She scooped up a few bills and some loose change and wiped the counter clean. As Jazz watched her work, she noticed a sadness to the woman's countenance that appeared when she was not talking to anyone. Jazz was still self-absorbed, and she was watching Rayeh to decide whether she should ask her if she and Riley could stay all night in the restaurant. But she couldn't help wonder about the woman's past and what might cause her underlying sadness.

After Rayeh deposited the money in the cash register, she looked up, directly at Jazz. Jazz turned her head abruptly and pretended to be studying the mural that stretched along the north side of the wall. Then Jazz looked back at her. Rayeh walked toward Jazz' booth.

"May I have a box for my burger?"

"Sure," said Rayeh, her cheerful self again.

Jazz decided she would leave for an hour or so, then come back and ask about staying in the restaurant all night. She could probably lie down in the booth seat, and if that didn't work, she could at least sit with her head on the table. The restaurant would have food and water—and a restroom.

Rayeh returned with the box. "Anything else, sweetie?"

Yeah, may I stay here tonight? Jazz almost asked, but she didn't quite have enough nerve. Did she think she would develop more courage by going for a walk and stewing over it for two more hours? Unlikely, but maybe. "Just the bill," Jazz said instead.

Jazz put her burger in the box and stood up. Rayeh was a couple inches taller than she was but not enough to be intimidating.

"There you go." Rayeh ripped the ticket from her pad and placed it face down on the table.

Ask her now, a voice inside Jazz' head told her, but Rayeh had already turned to leave. Jazz looked at the ticket and extracted \$8.58 from her pocket. One of the dollars was for a tip.

"Come on, Riley, let's go for a walk."

At those words, Riley scrambled to his feet. She didn't have to leash him—he was well trained and stayed by her side most the time. The one exception was if he saw a small animal running. She leashed him because other people got nervous seeing an unrestrained German shepherd walking down the city streets—and because there were leash laws in the city limits.

Jazz and Riley stepped out of the Blue Collar Café into the cool spring air. The day had started out clear and sunny, but now dark clouds were gathering and quickly moving in from the west. The wind was kicking up, and Jazz pulled her jacket tightly around herself. Riley didn't seem at all bothered by the weather. Instead, he seemed

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invigorated by it. His nose sniffed the air and his ears perked up. Jazz snapped on the leash, and they took off in the direction of the long park that bordered the industrial part of town.

On the way, Jazz stopped at a phone booth. She still had her cell phone, but her battery charger was in her apartment building. She wanted to save the cell phone's charge as long as possible. There was a slight chance her unemployment money had been deposited into her bank account. If so, she could rent a room for a week until she figured out what to do. Her job at the assembly plant ended ten days ago when the order for light rail cars was completed. She'd meant to put some money into savings, but it took most of her paycheck just to pay her rent on the now damaged apartment. She had looked for work immediately after being laid off, but she was in the category of "unskilled labor." Unfortunately, quite a few other people were in the same situation.

After checking her bank account and learning no new deposits had been made, Jazz took Riley to the park. Riley pranced about in the grass and was enervated by new and interesting scents. A squirrel scurried by and Riley took off after it as it rushed up a tree.

"Riley, you know you're not supposed to chase little creatures," she scolded. Riley trotted back toward her with a guilty look on his face as if to say he just couldn't help it. Jazz chuckled and patted his head.

Just then, the sky let go with a few sprinkles of rain. Jazz looked up to see even darker clouds than were there before. She put her hood over her head and was momentarily comforted by its soft warmth.

"C'mon, Riley. We have to find some shelter."

Riley ran along beside her to the other side of the park. By the time they reached the street where the Blue Collar Café was, the rain was coming down steadily.

Jazz didn't want to go back into the Blue Collar this soon, but she saw no other choice. The other shops in the area were retail stores where one could come in and browse but not really spend any time. Besides, she would have to leave Riley outside. There was a motorcycle store kitty-corner from the restaurant, but she wasn't really interested in buying a motorcycle or related accessories. The rain began to pound down, and Jazz found herself on the front step of the restaurant again.

Now she and Riley were both dripping wet, and she didn't want to mess up the floor inside. Maybe she could wait under the awning until the rain let up. She searched her backpack but didn't even have a small towel to dry off Riley.

Just then, the door opened and Rayeh stuck her head out. "What are you doing out here?" she said, alarmed.

"I'm sorry, Ma'am. I—."

"No need to be sorry. Get in here before you're completely soaked," Rayeh demanded.

Jazz looked down at Riley. She knew he would shake the minute he got inside. "Stay," she told him. Jazz stepped inside the door.

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"I'll grab some towels. You dry him off and then he can come in."

"I sure appreciate this, Ma'am."

Rayeh dashed off to the kitchen and came back with a stack of bar towels.

Once Riley was dried off, Rayeh escorted Jazz and the dog back to the kitchen. In an almost demanding voice she said, "Now, what's going on with you?"

Jazz was taken aback. She decided this was as good a time as any to ask about staying in the restaurant tonight. "Truth is, Ma'am—."

"Rayeh—you don't have to call me Ma'am. Makes me feel old." A corner of her mouth turned into a smile.

Jazz relaxed. "I need a place to stay tonight, Rayeh. I was wondering if Riley and I could stay in the restaurant. My apartment building was bombed this morning and my unemployment money hasn't shown up in the bank yet, and I don't want to leave Riley outside all night."

Jazz expected Rayeh to say no or to offer some suggestion other than what she said next.

"I could use a dishwasher if you're interested. Just part-time, but you and your dog could stay in a small room I've got here in back—in exchange for your work. You could take your meals here as well."

"Uh, okay," said Jazz. The relief that hit her just then was indescribable. "May I see the room?"

"Of course, right this way."

The room was small with dark brick walls like part of the restaurant inside, sort of gloomy. One window with bars on the outside looked out into the alley. But the floor was carpeted with a neutral brown and gave the space a semi-warm atmosphere as did the light orange curtains on the window. One twin bed sat in the corner accompanied by a nightstand. A small TV sat atop a chest of drawers that was placed at the foot of the bed. A bathroom with a shower, no tub, took up most of the opposite space, making the room long and narrow. A small closet with one sliding door was next to the bathroom. However, there was room (barely) next to the bed for Riley to lie down. Another plus was the room had its own exit/entrance to the outside. There was no kitchen, as a big one was available in the restaurant.

Rayeh showed Jazz the facilities in which she would be working. The restaurant had an industrial dishwasher, but many of the dishes had to be rinsed off first, especially if they had egg stuck to them. This wasn't what Jazz had in mind for a job, but she wasn't complaining—she had a place to stay for herself and Riley.

Jazz went right to work. She finished loading the late lunch dishes and turned the machine on. There wasn't much to do between mealtimes except wipe tables and collect the few coffee cups and plates left by intermittent customers.

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The rain stopped just before 4 p.m. Rayeh took off her apron and slipped on her jacket. Jazz wondered where she was going, but she didn't want to sound nosy by asking. It turned out she didn't have to.

Rayeh walked over to her. "I'd like to see that apartment building of yours."

Jazz was surprised but didn't question her. "It's blocked off with crime scene tape. We can't get in."

"That's okay," said Rayeh. "Right now, I just want to see the site. Would you be willing to go with me and show me where it is?"

Jazz frowned. She wondered why Rayeh was so intent on seeing the building. Some people liked any kind of sensationalism, but Rayeh didn't strike her as that type. Jazz' hesitation was brief. "Yeah, I guess." She thought about her dog, waiting in the small room. "What about Riley?"

Rayeh thought for a moment. "How far is the building?"

"A little over a mile."

Rayeh walked to the door, opened it, and stepped outside. When she returned, she said, "Looks like it's clearing up. How about we walk?"

Jazz thought of something else. "What about dinner? If we walk, we probably won't be back before five."

Rayeh waved her hand in an "it-doesn't-matter" gesture. "We'll be okay. Jimmy, Rita and Clyde can take care of things while we're gone. In fact, I meant to tell you, from now on, your shift will start at six and end at two. I'm not going to make you work all day.

"Okay by me," Jazz said. "Be right back." She went to her room to get Riley.

When the three of them arrived at the blown out apartment building, there was indeed still crime scene tape around the perimeter. Reporters from three TV stations were standing by for more news about the suspected terrorist attack, but fire crews had left the scene. They had been there earlier when Jazz had come back from her walk to discover the disaster.

"Which one was your apartment?" Rayeh asked.

"Around back, first floor corner, but—."

Rayeh took Jazz' hand and led her around to the other side of the building as close to the perimeter as they were allowed. Then she removed a small pair of binoculars from her handbag, put the strap around her neck, and held the binoculars up to her eyes. She looked through them for a long time—maybe five minutes or more—focusing first on Jazz's apartment, then on other parts of the building, then back to Jazz' apartment again. Finally, she let the binoculars fall to her chest.

"What are you looking for?" Jazz asked, wondering how she could see anything, even with the binoculars. Structurally, the outside of the building was pretty much intact except for some chunks of brick that had fallen out in a few places. The windows had been broken out, but they were only small openings from this distance. Even with a

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magnifying eyepiece, a person wouldn't be able to see much of the insides. Fire fighters on the scene at the time had told her the inside of her apartment was pretty well destroyed and that there had been several fatalities and numerous injuries.

"I don't see anyone inside the building, but it looks as though your belongings were not all destroyed. You're going to need some clothes. It would be a good idea to get your salvageable items out of there before looters come around."

"But how can you see all that?" Jazz asked, puzzled. She hoped Rayeh was right though. Perhaps her photo album had not been burned or ruined. And it would be nice to have her cell phone charger.

Rayeh ignored her question. "We'll bring my car back later."

"But the crime scene tape will probably be up for days," Jazz said.

"I think we can get around that," said Rayeh. "I'm just glad they didn't leave anyone inside the building."

"How can you be sure?"

"I have good eyes. Trust me."

That evening after the restaurant closed at 8 p.m., Rayeh, Jazz, and Riley squeezed into Rayeh's car and drove over to the apartment building. Rayeh backed her car up to a parking space next to Jazz's apartment, breaking the crime scene tape. No one appeared to be patrolling the area, but Jazz was nervous anyway. If Rayeh broke the law in this manner, how else might she break it? Jazz had always avoided getting into any confrontation with the law, even if it was jaywalking.

"Wait here while I go in," Rayeh said. Jazz was more than glad to do that. If any cops came around, she would duck down. She hoped Riley wouldn't bark.

Sooner than Jazz expected, Rayeh came back to the car with a black garbage bag full of clothing. "Hit the trunk release, will you?" Jazz hunted for the lever. "It's on the left side of the wheel."

The trunk popped open and Rayeh placed the bag of clothing inside. Jazz wondered if that was really her clothing or if Rayeh had taken it from another apartment. She was so curious, she got out of the car despite the danger of being seen by anyone.

Rayeh was just about to close the trunk when Jazz told her to wait. One quick glance through the clothing told her it was indeed hers. Some of it was dusted in black soot, but otherwise it appeared undamaged.

"What are you looking for?" Rayeh asked.

"Just wanted to make sure this stuff was mine," Jazz said truthfully. Now she felt more brave. Riley had not barked, and Rayeh had made it in and out without being seen. "I appreciate this. I'd like to go in there."

"I'd rather you didn't," said Rayeh. "It was pretty messy getting in and out."

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Jazz looked at the woman's unsoiled clothing, a black skin-tight jumpsuit. "I just wanted to see if my photo album was still there, and I need the adapter for my cell phone."

Rayeh thought for a moment. "The side where your bookcase was located was blown out pretty bad."

"My photo album wasn't on my bookcase. It was on the bottom shelf of my nightstand."

Rayeh looked away then back at Jazz. "I believe that was still intact."

"And my adapter was plugged in on the floor—to a power strip—on the other side of my bed."

"All right, you wait here. Get into the car and close the door. I'll be right back."

Jazz did as she was told but wondered why Rayeh was so insistent she didn't come in. She felt strange knowing another person was going through her belongings. She didn't know why—she just did.

Jazz waited until Rayeh was out of sight, then quietly opened the car door and stepped out. "Stay," she told Riley, who protested with a soft whine but obeyed. She stepped lightly around the corner of the building to find the back door caved in. Upon closer examination, Jazz found the entrance completely blocked by rubble and clutter, but she saw no sign of Rayeh.

Where did she go? Jazz wondered. She surveyed the area. All the windows on the ground floor of this side of the building were either boarded up or inaccessible due to sharp shards of broken glass. If the back of the building was blocked like this, why then did Rayeh head for the back both times?

Just then a spotlight shone against the side of the building. Jazz ducked down behind the large green dumpster. Then she heard the chopping sound of helicopter blades swishing through the air, becoming louder as the aircraft moved in closer. She was actually relieved the spotlight hadn't come from someone or something on the ground. She had a better chance of escape this way.

Jazz slid underneath the dumpster, so she was able to avoid detection. She waited until she no longer heard the chopper blades, then slowly emerged. Just as she stepped out into the alley, she saw Rayeh in front of her, running toward the parking lot. She's going to be upset that I left the car, Jazz thought. Too bad—she should have let me go with her into my own apartment.

Jazz ran after her and got to the car just as Rayeh was opening the door. Rayeh turned around and handed Jazz her photo album and cell phone adapter. The cover of the album was partially burned, but the adapter appeared intact.

"I also grabbed these cans of dog food, but what looked like a bag of dry food got blown to bits."

"Thanks," said Jazz.

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Rayeh glared at her. "I suggest you get into the car before anyone else comes snooping around here." Her tone of voice angered Jazz, but Jazz said nothing and got into the car. She didn't need anyone bossing her around, not while she wasn't at work anyway. Well, she'd stay at the Blue Collar only as long as she absolutely had to. What happened to the sweet woman Rayeh was when Jazz had first met her?

They drove in silence back to the Blue Collar. Jazz occupied herself by flipping through her photo album. Surprisingly, most of the photos were undamaged. Only a few more recent ones at the end of her book had been scorched. But those from her youth were fine. She reviewed them again, reminiscing about her early childhood. One picture in particular stood out—a neighbor must have taken it, because her mother, father, brother and herself were in it. She was four years old and her brother was two. They were on the swings in their backyard. Her mom was pushing Brian, and her dad was pushing her. They seemed like the happy family back then, but were they? Even at that time, discontent was brewing between her parents—discontent that led to divorce four years later when Jazz was barely eight years old.

Rayeh drove the car into the alley behind the Blue Collar. Jazz had been so deep in thought, she momentarily forgot where she was.

Rayeh handed her a key. "This is to your room."

"Thanks," Jazz said without looking at her. She opened the car door and called Riley.

"Wait," said Rayeh. Jazz looked at her this time. "I didn't mean to be so harsh with you."

"Not a big deal," said Jazz and started go.

"Yes, it is a big deal. I just didn't want to get caught. I was trying to help you, but I didn't want you to get into trouble on my account."

"Well, I didn't ask you to help me get my stuff. It was your idea."

"That's one of my big faults," Rayeh conceded. "I have a tendency to help people without asking them first."

Jazz' anger dissipated at Rayeh's confession. "That's okay. I'm glad to have my stuff, especially this." She patted the photo album.

Rayeh nodded acknowledgement. "I'll see you tomorrow. I'll be in a little late—maybe around nine. Rita will show you what to do, and she may need your help prepping the food. Clyde and Jimmy should be able to cover the tables until I get there, but they'll need your help clearing them."

Jazz was alarmed. "But I don't know how to cook."

You probably won't have to, hon, but there's really nothing to it. Rita's a good teacher."

Jazz shut the car door. Rayeh waited until she was safely inside, then she drove away.

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Despite the excitement of the day or perhaps because of it, Jazz couldn't go to sleep. She lay in bed watching the shadows flicker across the ceiling and listening to unfamiliar creaks in the building. She had to start her shift at 6 a.m., and staying awake all night wasn't a good idea. After an hour of lying in bed wide awake, Jazz turned on the light. She sat up and looked down at Riley on the floor beside her bed, sleeping soundly. She grabbed the remote and flicked on the TV. Riley's ears twitched, and he opened his eyes.

"It's okay, boy. I just can't sleep. Wish I could be like you."

A late night talk show was on. Jazz listened with partial interest until breaking news interrupted it. Two men in handcuffs, their backs to the camera, were seen being taken away from a building. Jazz turned up the volume and took a closer look at the images of her former apartment building. The two men were now being taken into custody as the main suspects in the bombing of the building. A small bag of uncut diamonds had been found in the possession of one of the men. Police suspected the diamonds had been hidden in the building, and the men had bombed it in order to find them. Jazz' heart pounded. If she and Rayeh had been caught at the building, *they* would most likely be suspects, even without having the diamonds in their possession.

Riley whined softly then closed his eyes again.

Jazz had had Riley for a little over a year. A man at the assembly plant, Larry, had to move out of his house and couldn't take the dog. Jazz had told him she'd take Riley if she could find a place where she was allowed to have him. She'd diligently searched for almost two weeks until she found the ground floor apartment that allowed pets for an exorbitant deposit of \$500. As an aside thought, she wondered if she'd get that deposit back now that the apartment was ruined. Probably not, but she would find the management company and ask. Larry came to visit Riley a few times at the beginning, but he stopped after a couple of months. Jazz never approached him about it. Maybe it was too hard on him to see the dog and not be able to take him home. Riley, on the other hand, had no problem adapting to Jazz, for which Jazz was grateful.

She reached down and scratched Riley's head. "I'm glad you're here with me, boy." It was true that before she had a dog, she had more freedom. She could go out after work with her coworkers or linger at the mall or grocery store as long as she wanted without worrying about getting home to let the dog out or walk him. But now she didn't know how she ever got along without a dog. And Riley was so good—so little trouble—and smart as well.

Once the breaking news was over, Jazz flipped through the TV channels, but found nothing of interest. She finally left it set at a twenty-four hour news channel.

Jazz got up to use the bathroom. The room was getting colder, and she sneezed as she got back into bed. She opened the drawer of the nightstand, looking for a tissue, when she came across a framed photo of Rayeh and a younger woman posing with their heads together and smiling. The other woman was beautiful. She had olive skin and hair the color of dark chocolate and wore a New York Yankees' baseball cap. Rayeh's fair skin and blonde hair contrasted next to the woman. Jazz wondered who she was. A sister? A friend? Or maybe a lover?

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Jazz turned out the light and lay back down, leaving the TV on. At some point she fell asleep. She woke abruptly at 5:30 a.m. to the beeping of her cell phone alarm. She desperately wanted to stay in bed, sleep for another three hours or so, stay warm. But she forced herself up and dressed quickly.

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Rita was tall, skinny, and redheaded, but she wasn't much older than Jazz, maybe twenty-five at the most. At twenty-two, Jazz was probably the youngest employee unless Rayeh had recently hired anyone new besides herself. Jazz had been coming to this restaurant all hours of the day since being laid off and thought she had at least gotten a glimpse of all the employees. Rayeh had been here for the last two or three days, but yesterday was the first time she and Jazz had formally met.

"You can start by cleanin' those coffee pots," Rita ordered. The coffee pots were huge and required a lot of lifting and disassembling. "There's an apron on that hook there." Rita pointed to a group of aprons hanging on a nail.

Jazz obeyed and started to work. She already knew she wasn't going to like this job much, but at least it gave her and Riley room and board. Rayeh had told her she could help herself to anything in the kitchen whenever she wanted but not in excess. "Don't give Riley any steaks or hamburger," she'd told Jazz.

Breakfast time whizzed by. Jazz was so busy clearing tables, pouring coffee, and doing dishes, she didn't have time to worry about being competent. Before she knew it, it was 9:10. The last time she'd looked at the clock, it was 6:45.

Jazz was clearing the last table when Rayeh came through the door. Jazz had expected her earlier than this, but Rita had told her that Rayeh came and left all hours of the day. Being the manager and the owner's daughter, she could do that, Rita had said. Jack had worked pretty regular hours, according to Rita.

"How are you today?" Rayeh said to Jazz. She was cheerful—probably got a good night's sleep, Jazz thought.

"Okay," I guess.

"Good." Rayeh looked around the restaurant. "Why don't you take a break?"

"How long?"

"Oh, enough time for you to take Riley outside for a little walk and then have a cup of coffee."

"I'm not sure how long that will take."

"Oh, a half-hour I guess," Rayeh said as she headed toward the kitchen.

Rayeh certainly was casual about her employees. There was no time clock either.

As Jazz walked Riley, she wondered about Rayeh. Where did she live? Where did her parents live? What did she do before managing the Blue Collar? And who was the mysterious woman in the photo Jazz had found in her nightstand? Maybe Jazz would work up the nerve to ask her.

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When Jazz returned to the restaurant, Rayeh was sitting at a booth, drinking coffee. She motioned Jazz over. "Get yourself a cup of coffee. We're all caught up until lunch."

Jazz did as she was told and returned to the booth. After she was seated, Rayeh asked her how the job was going so far. Jazz answered that it was fine, that Rita had been very helpful.

"Rita may have told you I work irregular hours," Rayeh said.

"Yes, she did mention that."

"I work at the Children's Hospital part-time—actually I'm on call there, so sometimes I have to leave unexpectedly."

"Oh," said Jazz. "So are you a nurse or doctor?"

"Neither. I was a paramedic back East, but haven't been certified in this state." She didn't offer any more explanation as to what she did at the hospital.

"So why are you working at the restaurant?"

"My father had to take a break from the restaurant to take care of my mother, who is recovering from surgery."

"I'm sorry," said Jazz. "Not that you're here, of course, but that your mother had to have surgery." Jazz didn't ask what was wrong with Rayeh's mother—she thought that might be too nosy.

"Thank you," Rayeh said. "Dad will be back when Mom can take care of herself again. Then I can devote myself to my other work."

Jazz was suddenly sad that Rayeh would be leaving the Blue Collar, just when she was getting to know her better.

Rayeh stood up. "Guess we'd better get back to work. It'll be lunchtime before you know it. I'm sure Rita could use some help preparing the salad ingredients."

Jazz stood and took both Rayeh's and her own coffee cups back to the kitchen. Rayeh was right. Lunchtime came quickly, once Jazz got busy chopping tomatoes, carrots, green onions, and celery. And lunchtime itself passed even more quickly. Before she knew it, the clock read 1:33. Jazz was due off work at 2:00.

After work, Jazz walked Riley to the park and wandered around thinking about what she was going to do with her life. Her mother lived in New York and her father and brother lived in Miami—both places a long way from where she was now. She envied Rayeh that her parents were still together. She wondered if Rayeh's intermittent sadness stemmed from a boyfriend who'd left her, or perhaps it had to do with the woman in the picture.

Rayeh was gone when Jazz got back to the restaurant. All of a sudden, Jazz was tired, so she went to her room to lie down. She flipped on the TV and fell to sleep almost immediately. When she woke again, the clock read 7:50.

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Jazz got up and took Riley out for a short walk. It was Friday night, and she thought about going to The Rocket, the local bar where she had met with some of her coworkers from time to time. She had gone last week, leaving Riley home, but with most of her crew laid off, only a couple of people she knew were there—Carl and Sid, neither of whom she particularly liked. She left The Rocket and went back to her room.

That night as she lay in bed, she thought about her life and her uncertain future. She certainly didn't want to be a dishwasher or even a cook. She should probably apply for a grant and go to college, but she had no idea what she wanted to study. She envied other young people, many of them younger than herself, who had specific goals and knew the direction they wanted their lives to take. Jazz finally drifted off to sleep, only to wake early again for her work shift.

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After Jazz had worked at the Blue Collar for a couple of weeks, she got into the routine of things and felt more comfortable with her duties and with the other workers in the restaurant. Rita was right about Rayeh—she worked odd hours, and some days Jazz didn't even see her. Rayeh would suddenly get a call on her cell phone and just leave. Often, her sadness would re-emerge. Something terrible must have happened in Rayeh's past, and Jazz was determined to ask her when the time was right—if the time was ever right.

One afternoon while Jazz was walking Riley in the park, a squirrel darted past Riley's line of sight. Jazz usually let Riley off the leash in the park so he could get some exercise. This time, a squirrel ran out into the street, and Riley followed.

Jazz followed as fast as she could but before she could catch up, a car came around a corner and hit Riley's back end. Jazz heard the thud. She screamed as she ran to catch up with the incident.

The driver, an older man, gray and balding, stood over the dog. Immediately, Jazz could see he was distraught. "I'm so sorry, miss. I didn't see the dog. He just came out of nowhere."

Jazz barely heard him as she knelt down beside Riley. He whimpered softly but seemed to be breathing okay. She examined his body and discovered a cut on his left rear leg on the backside of his knee. She lightly touched the area surrounding the cut, and Riley flinched.

Cars were coming, and the man who hit Riley started directing them to go around Jazz, the dog, and himself.

Jazz wanted to get Riley out of the street, but she couldn't do it by herself. Plus, she didn't know if moving him would further injure him. Without thinking, she pulled out her phone and called Rayeh.

Rayeh answered right away. She was at the restaurant. "Can you bring your car over to the east side of the park? Riley got hit by a car."

"I'm on my way," Rayeh said, and disconnected the call. She sounded as though she were used to responding to emergencies—no hesitation, no conversation—just, "I'll be there."

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Jazz kept her hand on Riley's head, stroking him gently, while she waited for Rayeh.

It took only a few minutes for Rayeh to arrive. She immediately rushed over to Riley and knelt down. She didn't touch the dog, only stared intently at him for a moment.

Jazz glanced over at Rayeh's eyes as she was scrutinizing Riley. Her eyes looked foreign, otherworldly, as if they didn't belong to a human being. Jazz had never seen anyone look like that. Her eyes were hollow as if she were looking right through something. That startled Jazz. "What's wrong?" she heard herself say.

Rayeh came out of her trance-like state and turned toward Jazz. Her eyes were normal again. "His leg is broken, but he's going to be okay. There's no internal bleeding."

Relief flooded Jazz but she wondered how Rayeh could be so sure. She'd said she'd been a paramedic, not a veterinarian.

Rayeh handed Jazz her keys. "There's a first aid kit in the trunk of my car. Would you get it for me?"

"Sure." Jazz got halfway to the car, then went back to ask which key she should use. As she approached Rayeh, she did a double take. It was difficult to believe her eyes, but she actually saw Rayeh's hand *inside* Riley's leg. She didn't want to startle Rayeh—that might make things worse for Riley.

The man who had hit Riley was moving his car out of the street. No one else had seen what Rayeh was doing, and Jazz guessed she wanted to keep it that way.

Jazz backed away, stunned. Then she remembered the first aid kit. She tried four keys before she found the one that fit the trunk of Rayeh's car.

Rayeh took the kit without looking up at Jazz. "How's he doing?" Jazz asked as she knelt down to Riley's side.

Rayeh removed some antibiotic cream from the kit and opened it. "He's not in pain now." She spread the cream on the cut on Riley's leg.

"How do you know?"

"I set the bone," she said matter-of-factly. "Still, we need to get him to a vet. He's going to need something to hold his leg together. And he'll have to be off it for a while."

"Okay," said Jazz.

"You stay here and I'll get my car."

The man who had hit Riley returned and helped Jazz and Rayeh get Riley into the back seat of Rayeh's car.

"I don't have money for the vet," Jazz said, as they pulled up in front of the animal hospital. "I only started getting my unemployment compensation two weeks ago, and I used it to pay some bills."

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"Don't worry about that," said Rayeh. "Doc Jones owes me a few favors."

Jazz frowned. "What do you mean? You help out at the vet's too?"

"Once in a while."

Doc Jones was a tall young woman with short-cropped hair and a delightful accent. When Jazz asked where she was from, she told her Nairobi, Kenya. Jazz liked her immediately. Rayeh and the vet carried Riley through the waiting room and into one of the examination rooms. Three people, two each with dogs and one with a cat, watched the procession with interest.

"I'm glad you were there, Rayeh," the vet said. They eyed each other as if knowing a secret they were keeping from Jazz.

Doc Jones turned toward Jazz. "He's probably uncomfortable but not in pain." She rolled the "r" in "probably," but otherwise spoke her words clearly and fluently. "He's going to need a support on his leg for a few weeks, and I'd like to keep him overnight tonight."

Immediately, Jazz thought of money again. She looked at Rayeh. Rayeh nodded, then turned to Doc Jones. "Definitely," she said. Evidently, the two of them had worked out some financial arrangement already.

"We'll come back and get him tomorrow," Rayeh promised Jazz.

That night, Jazz felt so alone without Riley. Even the TV didn't fill the emptiness. But she kept telling herself how grateful she was that Riley would be okay.

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Three more weeks went by, and it was time for the support to be removed from Riley's leg. That day, Rayeh drove Jazz and Riley to the veterinarian's office. Jazz was determined to confront Rayeh about her special healing abilities, and this seemed as good a time as any. But she chickened out by the time they drove into the parking lot of the animal hospital.

Riley was much happier without the leg support, and he pranced out of the office, though he still drug his leg a little.

"Thank you," Jazz told Rayeh. "I'll pay you back when I can."

Rayeh shot her a stern look. "No payback is necessary. I told you, Jones owed me a few favors."

"But..."

"Let's just leave it at that. End of subject."

Rayeh was so insistent that Jazz complied with an "okay."

"You want me to stop at the park?" she asked.

"That would be great. I'm sure Riley would love it. Can you wait in case he gets tired?"

"Sure," said Rayeh. "I was planning on it."

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Jazz hesitated before getting out of the car. Rayeh studied her. "What is it?"

"I...saw what you did to Riley." Rayeh frowned. "I saw you put your hand inside his leg."

"Oh that," said Rayeh. She looked out the window into the distance.

Riley barked, impatient to get out of the car. Rayeh opened her door. "I'll walk with you."

Riley almost fell on his butt after leaping from the car. "Take it easy, boy," Jazz said. "And no chasing squirrels!"

As the two of them walked, Rayeh kept looking into the distance, as if formulating what she was going to say. Jazz was about to ask her if she was okay when Rayeh finally spoke. "What you saw was not a result of your eyes deceiving you. I *did* put my hand inside of Riley's leg."

"But how...?"

"I can speed up the vibration of molecular activity in my body or selected parts of my body."

"How can that be?" Jazz asked, astounded.

Rayeh stopped walking and faced Jazz. "A few people know my secret. Many believe I am merely psychic. I'm not. But if the press got a hold of this information, my life would never be my own again. I'd have no privacy and would probably be taken by the government to be studied in a laboratory."

"I understand," Jazz said.

Riley, noticing the women had stopped walking, returned and barked at both of them. "Okay, Riley, we're coming."

They continued walking in silence for a moment as questions formed in Jazz' mind.

"How did you know where to put your hand into Riley's leg? Could you see in there too?"

"Yes," Rayeh simply said.

More thoughts raced through Jazz' mind, like when Rayeh got into her apartment building when no apparent entrances were available. And then she thought about how useful Rayeh's abilities would be in a hospital emergency room or as a paramedic. She would be able to diagnose a problem immediately.

"What about your clothing? Can you make that pass through solid objects as well?"

"It can be done if the clothing is snug against my skin, but it's much easier if I roll up my sleeve as I did in the case of Riley's leg."

Jazz thought about the snug black jumpsuit Rayeh wore when entering the apartment building. She wore looser clothing at the restaurant—sometimes even a dress.

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"You must be wondering how I got your belongings outside of the building."

"It did cross my mind. Are you sure you can't read minds too?"

Rayeh laughed. "I'm sure. It's just that if I were you and just found out what you found out about me, I'd wonder the same thing."

Jazz relaxed. "Well, don't worry, I won't tell anyone your secret," Jazz said.

Rayeh put her arm around Jay's shoulders and gave her a squeeze. "I appreciate that."

Riley spotted a squirrel and chased it until it scurried up a tree. Jazz went running after him.

"Riley, no!" she scolded. "Haven't you learned your lesson?"

Riley gave her a guilty look, then lay down. Rayeh caught up to them.

"It's his nature to chase squirrels. You can train him so far, but chances are he'll always chase squirrels," Rayeh said.

"I suppose so," Jazz said, disappointed. She clipped the leash to his collar. "I'm just going to have to keep an eye on you, boy."

Riley stood and wagged his tail, all evidence of guilt gone.

Jazz turned to Rayeh. "Thank you so much for helping to heal him. I don't know what I would do without him—he is my sidekick."

Rayeh smiled, but it was a sad smile. "I had a sidekick once too."

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Jazz and Rayeh sat in the Blue Collar and talked until well after closing. That night, Jazz lay awake in bed going over their conversation in her head. Rayeh had lost not a sister, not a lover, but a friend, a confidant, a sidekick. Her grief was compounded by the fact that she blamed herself for Gwen's death. Reluctantly, Rayeh told Jazz what had happened.

Gwen and Rayeh had responded to the police's call for help with an ongoing domestic violence case. Rayeh had "seen" through the apartment door just as the wife pulled a gun on the husband. "Now," she had told the police. One of the officers kicked down the door, and Gwen rushed in right as the wife was about to pull the trigger. Gwen rushed up to the wife, putting herself in the line of fire a fraction of a second too late. The gun was fired and the bullet hit Gwen point blank in the chest. Gwen, not being a police officer and not anticipating being fired upon, had not been wearing a vest.

Jazz didn't see how this incident was in any way Rayeh's fault, but Rayeh rationalized that if Gwen had not been helping her out, Gwen would not have died. Rayeh said she never again wanted to be responsible for putting anyone else's life in danger.

Rayeh told Jazz her abilities hadn't begun to manifest until she eight years old. The seeing through things came before the ability to put her hand through objects. "I

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admit that I was guilty of looking in places I shouldn't have when I was a kid. I was curious, you know?" she said. "But I don't do that now, only if it's necessary."

Incredible, Jazz thought. Rayeh must have needed someone to confide in, as she continued telling Jazz about her story. Rayeh's mother had a rare blood disease and took a particular type of medicine during her pregnancy with Rayeh. The medicine was experimental but quite effective in eradicating the disease. It involved the injection of nanites, tiny robots, into her blood to repair cellular damage. She didn't want to take any medication while she was pregnant, but doctors insisted she could die before the baby was born if she didn't.

Anyway, the result was that some of the nanites transferred to Rayeh's body and began to slowly replicate themselves over the years. Rayeh's parents kept her secret from the doctors, for they were sure Rayeh would be taken away and experimented on. Only Rayeh's mother's doctor knew what had happened. Rayeh's mother was eventually cured of the blood disease and never manifested Rayeh's unusual abilities. No one knew why.

Jazz asked exactly what a sidekick did. Rayeh told her not to get any ideas—she was not going to have a sidekick again, not even a dog. It would be too dangerous.

"Please, just tell me about Gwen."

"Basically, Gwen watched my back." Jazz saw the pain in Rayeh's face as she pronounced Gwen's name. "Actually, we looked out for each other, but she was my backup when it came to concealing my secret."

At that moment, Jazz wanted to jump in and volunteer her services as Rayeh's sidekick. It would be a much more interesting life than the one she was leading now. Besides, she didn't know what she wanted to do with her life, and helping Rayeh help others seemed as noble a path as any. But she didn't. Rayeh would reject the idea. She so much as said so.

Jazz sat up and turned on the light. She wasn't going to fall asleep for a while, so she might as well read or draw. She picked up her novel and tried to concentrate, but she found herself reading the same paragraph over and over again. This is ridiculous, she told herself. She opened her nightstand drawer and took out her drawing pad. Underneath the pad was the picture of Rayeh and the unknown woman. She picked it up. This must be Gwen. Why is she hiding this picture in the drawer? Maybe too painful for her to have it in view.

Jazz worked on her sketch of Riley. Although drawing came easy to her for the most part, she still struggled with getting the similarities accurate. Right now she couldn't get Riley's face the right shape—it was too wide in the jowls, or something. She erased and retraced several times until it was almost right. Then she sighed deeply, put her pad and pencil away, and sunk back down into bed.

Jazz dreamed so vividly of the woman in the picture—Gwen?—that upon awakening, she believed she had actually met her. In the dream, Rayeh and Gwen were sitting at a booth in the Blue Collar Café and laughing. When Jazz approached to clear their dishes, they stopped abruptly and stared at her as if she were rudely interrupting something. As Jazz washed up and got dressed, she analyzed this dream

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to mean she had a desire to be Rayeh's new sidekick, but the presence of Gwen (or Gwen's ghost) was keeping her from being accepted into that role by Rayeh.

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Two days later, Rayeh asked Jazz if she would like to accompany her to a dealership to look at motor homes and travel trailers. Jazz was surprised by the invitation but gladly accepted.

"I'm going to be traveling for about six months. Mom is better, and Dad is going to fill in at the restaurant until we can find a permanent manager. He really wants to retire.

"Where are you going?" Jazz asked.

"Down to Arizona, New Mexico, and western Texas."

Jazz raised her eyebrows as to ask why.

"I've got some work lined up with the police departments of several small towns."

"Do they know about your...abilities?"

"On this trip, only one friend, in New Mexico, actually knows. The rest think I'm psychic."

Jazz thought about how she would feel staying at the restaurant with Jack and Rita while Rayeh was out traveling. She didn't want to stay, and she realized how important Rayeh had become to her in the last few weeks. "I'd like to come with you—Riley and I," she said boldly.

"Okay, I'll pick you up in back when the breakfast rush is over." Rayeh meant for the dealerships.

Jazz took a deep breath and stopped Rayeh as she was about to dash off. "No, I mean I want to go with you to the Southwest."

Rayeh stared at her for a moment. "Absolutely not."

* * * * *

Rayeh was a good person to be with if you were buying a used vehicle. Without looking underneath, she could tell that one of them had a rebuilt front end, another needed a new rear axle, and another had damage to the frame.

"None of these are safe," she said.

She ended up buying a brand new thirty-six-foot trailer that could sleep four if needed. "When I get back, I can put it in my parents' backyard. I'm staying in their house now, but Dad's snoring gets a bit much sometimes, and he often has the TV on too loud."

"So, did you stay in my room at the restaurant before that?"

"Yeah, but I was going to look for a place close to Mom and Dad's anyway."

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Jazz wondered how she could afford a new RV, but she didn't ask. She had more important things to focus on, like how she was going to get Rayeh to let her and Riley go with her to the Southwest.

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Two days later at her parents' house, Rayeh was all hooked up and ready to go. Jazz had accompanied her there and was going to catch a bus back to the restaurant. Just as Rayeh was about to leave, Jazz handed her the picture she'd found in her nightstand. "Is this Gwen?"

Rayeh's eyes popped open wide. "Where'd you get that?!" Evidently, she'd forgotten she stashed it away in the nightstand drawer.

"I found it in my room," Jazz said, determined not to be intimidated by Rayeh's stern manner. "You didn't answer my question," Jazz persisted. "Is this Gwen?"

Rayeh looked down for a moment. "Yes," she answered softly.

"Well, I think you should take it with you."

Rayeh took the picture and placed it face down on the passenger seat. "Fine," she said abruptly.

"I know you're trying to forget her, but you shouldn't."

Jazz expected a reprimand, but Rayeh didn't put up any resistance. "You're right. It's something I have to work out."

"I'm glad you realize that," Jazz said. Momentarily, the thought crossed her mind that she was counseling an older woman, a woman with a third more life experience than she had. "And I wish you would reconsider taking me—us—she patted Riley's head—with you."

"You certainly are persistent when you want something," Rayeh said. "I suppose you have your bags all packed and ready to go too."

"Mm-hmm. They're back at the restaurant, in my room. And I have some extra cash. Finally got my pet deposit back from that apartment's management company."

Rayeh stared at Jazz for a long moment. "Get in, I'll take you there. We'll talk about it on the way."

Riley jumped into the back seat of the now familiar car, while Jazz slipped into the passenger seat. Rayeh would not be sorry she took Jazz and Riley with her. She absolutely would not regret the decision.

THE END