

## A QUESTION OF MANHOOD

A Novel by Robin Reardon (Kensington, 2010)

*Excerpt from Chapter Eleven*

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Before lunch that day, there was this forty-ish guy in ratty jeans and a sleeveless once-white undershirt, tattoos on both arms, dirty and thinning hair pulled into a messy ponytail, stubble on his jaw, who came in practically dragging this German Shepherd by a chain attached to a body harness, a muzzle around its snout. They made their way past the door to the office. I was bagging for Dave at register two, and I saw Dad look up as the show passed his office. The dog was hunkered down, looking ready to snap at imaginary threats the whole time the guy was pulling him along.

Dad got up and stood in the office doorway, watching as the guy headed toward dog supplies. I knew JJ was cleaning tank filters at the moment and wondered if Dad would go and get him. By the time the guy stopped all I could see from where I stood was his head, but I could hear the dog's nails clicking; it must have been pacing over there.

I finished up with the customer I was bagging for and said to Dave, "I'm going over there. It might get ugly." I was kind of hoping it would.

"What d'you think you're gonna be able to do?"

I ignored Dave's question and looked toward Dad, who was now on his way across the floor. "Get JJ," was all he said to me.

He was at the tanks, as I'd expected. "JJ, there's a guy with a muzzled Shepherd in dog supplies. The guy looks mean, and the dog looks meaner. Dad wanted me to get you. I'll finish this filter for you."

Wiping his hands on a towel, JJ asked, "Did it look like trouble?"

"Couldn't really tell. Maybe he just needs a new muzzle or something."

JJ left me there, finishing his job and considering the possibilities of what might happen. The guy himself hadn't looked like the type who wanted to learn any new tricks. As quickly as possible I finished cleaning the filter and replaced it in the tank. Then I headed toward dog supplies, listening as I went. The guy was talking.

"And he keeps chewin' through these leather things. I want a metal one, and I brung him in here to prove to you that I need it." I was close enough now to see he was talking to Dad. JJ stood a little to one side, watching the dog pace on its lead. Suddenly the guy yanked on the leash, which was really a metal chain attached with a large hook to the body harness. "Sit still, damn it!" The dog snapped its jaw as much as it could, shook its head, and stopped moving. But only momentarily.

Dad said, "We can certainly sell you another muzzle, but I don't carry metal ones. And if he's chewing through the leather, then a metal one would damage his teeth."

There was a quiet moment where everyone seemed to consider this, and I saw JJ take a breath. "How much time does he spend with the muzzle on?"

The guy looked at JJ like he hadn't known he was there and scowled. For sure, he wasn't there for a session with the behaviorist. Then he shrugged. "Most of the time. I keep him at my

shop. Welding. But during the day I don't want him chewing on my customers, or me." He looked back at Dad as though he couldn't quite bring himself to have a conversation with someone as insubstantial-looking as JJ. "I take it off him at night and when he gets fed. He guards the lot."

Dad was nodding like he understood, but JJ was far from through. He said, "So he never leaves the shop yard? How does he get exercise?"

The guy turned to JJ again, and the look on his face was like he couldn't quite believe this child was still pestering him. "I have him on a run. He can go back and forth as much as he likes."

"Then no wonder he's pacing in here." And JJ was right; the dog was at it again.

The guy put his free hand on his hip and glared. "What d'you know about it?"

I thought JJ looked a little scared, but he stood his ground. "If the only exercise this dog gets is going back and forth on a run, that's not anywhere near what he needs. But it's all he knows. So since he needs more, he'll do it whenever he has a chance."

The guy snorted and looked at Dad. "What am I supposed to do, take him to a doggie park?" He laughed and threw his head back. "He'd eat every other mutt in the place!"

JJ went on like he hadn't been interrupted. "He should be walked. Twice a day would be best, for at least forty-five minutes each time. Once he's calmer, he wouldn't need the muzzle. And then yes, eventually you could take him to a dog park." Any second now I expected JJ to tell the guy how to pronounce Wunderkind correctly.

Dad was getting nervous, but I could tell he didn't want to let on. He was working hard at looking casual. The guy turned his whole body toward JJ this time and said, "What are you, some kind of dog expert?"

"Yes." Simple. True. Confident. Unbelievable.

"So, you wanna take him for a walk?" He held the leash out toward JJ, but JJ turned toward our supply display, picked out a metal prong collar and two thick leather leads, and he attached the collar to one lead. The guy laughed again. "You're gonna be lunch, kid. That muzzle he has on is nearly chewed through."

JJ was pretty much ignoring the guy now. He stood directly in the path of the dog, who was headed his way in his pacing routine. JJ didn't move, and he didn't look at the dog. The dog stopped and growled. JJ didn't budge. The dog barked and growled again. JJ stood. I was thinking that it took a man to do that. Or someone very, very stupid. Maybe the guy agreed, 'cause he stopped making comments.

The dog turned and headed back the way he had come. The guy got this "told you so" look on his face. JJ moved forward so the dog would have to stop sooner on his next turn.

The dog was really unhappy about having his pacing space reduced again. Lots more growling, and barking, head lowered, shoulders hunched, ready to spring. But JJ stood there, not even looking at the dog. I glanced at the guy; he looked worried. Then at my dad; so did he. Then at JJ.

Calm, but present. Present in a big way. It's hard to describe how he looked. Kind of like nothing could hurt him. Very quietly he said, "Don't pull back on him unless he knocks me down." He turned his back on the dog.

*Unless he knocks you down?*

Jesus Christ! The kid was brave, I'll give him that. He stood there, the dog ready to pounce, for several seconds. And then the dog relaxed a little. He moved toward JJ, definitely on guard but not threatening. He sniffed everywhere he could reach, and then he turned and paced back the other way again. JJ turned and moved forward again, so now the dog had very little pacing room. The Shepherd made one more pace, which was really more of a circle by this time, and then sat down with his back to his owner and his side to JJ, maybe three feet away.

"Well, I'll be," the guy said.

JJ slapped his thigh and, finally, looked at the dog, who got up and went to him, and then when JJ pressed down with stiff fingertips on the dog's rump, he sat again. Then JJ slipped the prong collar onto the dog's neck and positioned it where I knew he would, high behind the ears, one leather leash attached to it. Now, at last, he took the chain away from the owner. He took it off the harness and attached the second leather leash instead, grabbed both in one hand, and handed the chain to the owner.

"Paul?" JJ said without looking at me. I didn't even think he knew I was there. "Would you hold the harness leash as backup?" He held it in my direction.

*ME?* I just looked at him.

The guy couldn't take it. "Look, I'll do it. I know how to handle him."

JJ's arm retracted so the guy couldn't take the lead. He said, "Please don't be offended. It's just that you and the dog have a dynamic set up that's based on force and competition, and I'd like to avoid those factors if I can. Paul?"

Dad was looking at me hard. I couldn't tell what he wanted me to do. I mean, here was this customer who didn't really want—or, certainly, hadn't asked for—JJ's demonstration of what a good dog this could be. But Dad didn't say anything to JJ, or even look at him. In the end I decided to do the thing that made me look like I wasn't a coward. I swallowed and stepped forward, taking the leash like it was a snake.

"You're just backup, Paul. You stay on that side of him, and I'll stay on this one. Don't pull on the leash or hold it tight unless he attacks. It would be best if the dog isn't even aware of it. Now, I'm going to walk him to the side of the store where I don't see anyone at the moment, and then we're going out the front door and around the lot outside. Ready?"

If I hadn't been so scared, I'd love to have seen the look on the owner's face. Maybe even Dad's face would have a little less worship and a little more anxiety than it usually did around JJ.

JJ positioned himself beside the dog, looked forward, took one step, and tugged gently on the leash attached to the prong collar. The dog got up and followed him. What I was thinking was that I'd turned my back on the church just a few months too soon. At that moment, I wanted to pray and believe someone would help me. And as if I really had asked for help, as soon as we were far enough away from the owner, JJ started to talk.

"I'm not going to tell you that this dog isn't dangerous, Paul." *No shit.* "But he'll be far less dangerous away from his owner, and even less if both of us are calm. It could help if you think

of yourself as another member of the pack, and pretend you've accepted me as the leader. That will make it easier for the dog to do that. We'll all be better off in that case. So just be calm and stay beside the dog. I'm going to move a little ahead of him so he's actually following me."

He didn't look at me or even seem to wonder if I was listening, or if I would obey. The dog turned his head and tried to stall a few times, and JJ had to keep yanking sharply on the leash and doing that quick "Hey" of his. But he also kept talking to me.

"Ordinarily I would encourage you to take a position equivalent with mine, because the dog needs to see humans as leaders, but this dog is pretty far gone. And right now I just want to see how bad he is."

Finally I felt calm enough to speak. "Why? D'you think that guy in there is open to learning anything new about how to treat his dog?"

"Can I trust you to keep a confidence?"

So many things ran through my mind at this point. Mentally I tallied up all the secrets I was already keeping, including one or two for JJ. Finally, "Yes." *What's one more?*

He didn't say anything right away. We headed toward the door that opened into the parking lot, and when we got to it JJ stopped. There was no one outside.

I asked, "D'you want me to open the door?"

"No. Just be still and act like one of the pack. I'm going to lead."

I would have shrugged, but my arms were too tense from nervousness. The dog had stopped when JJ did, and JJ pressed his rump to get him to sit. Then JJ pushed the door open and the dog stood.

"Hey." JJ let the door shut and pressed the dog's rump again. We did this two or three times until the dog didn't respond to open door. JJ let a little slack into the leash, stepped outside holding the door with one hand, and then he tugged gently on the leash. The dog and I followed him outside.

JJ said, "I'm considering reporting the owner. If I do that, I want to be able to provide some information about the dog."

"Reporting him?"

"He's abusing the dog. I want to know if the Shepherd can be recovered, or if he's beyond reach."

So we walked around the perimeter of the lot two, three times? The dog was tense for the first circuit, and when someone drove in and got out of their car with a dog JJ had to yank the leash hard to get the Shepherd to look the other way, but the dog did it. JJ sat him down again and we waited until the other dog was inside before we went on with our walk. As we started moving again, I had to pry my fingers open, I'd held onto the leash so hard. Muzzle or no muzzle, this dog was Trouble.

Trouble might be his name. I said, "You didn't ask the guy what the dog's name was."

"I don't really care. And neither does the dog."

"That makes no sense. You can't tell me dogs don't know their names."

"They don't know that they *are* names. To the dog, his name is just a noise that always sounds the same, and the dog knows it's associated with him, but that's it."

"Wouldn't it help you control him, though?"

"No. Control comes through leadership."

"And that guy in there with the tattoos? He doesn't supply it?"

"That guy in there is most likely seen by the dog as competition at best, and possibly a tormentor. He couldn't lead the way out of his own back yard, and he's given the dog no reason to follow him."

*No reason to follow him. So why is the dog following JJ?* "What are you giving him?"

"Well, for one thing I've given him a natural walking pattern, treating him like a dog rather than a robot or a block of concrete. But first I let him know who was boss. I ignored his threats without growling back, like that guy does. I mean, he growls back. In a funny way, the dog and the owner are a lot alike. They both put on this tough-guy posture, they talk rough, they act mean. I can only guess what the guy needs, but this fellow here just wanted someone to take control in a way that lets him be a dog. That's what I gave him."

"Can you give the guy anything?"

JJ chuckled. "I gave him a shock. I'll bet he didn't expect a puny little kid like me to stand up to his killer Shepherd. I gave him an example of how the dog should be treated, of how to get the dog to take me seriously. More seriously than he takes the guy. Men like him usually think the tougher their dog is, the tougher the man is. I've shown him his dog can be just a dog, which that guy might see as making him seem less tough as a result. And so I've probably also given the man a reason to hate me."

"As if he needed another one."

"What?"

*Shit. Did I say that out loud? And can I recover from this?* What I'd been thinking was that the last thing a guy like that would tolerate would be to get shown up by a gay kid. A gay man. A gay anybody. "Nothing."

Maybe fifteen steps later JJ said, "Is there something you want to say to me?"

I cleared my throat. "Well... I mean, you know. What you said. You're not that big."

"You said '*another* reason.' I'd already pointed that one out."

He had me. He knew, I was sure, exactly what I'd been thinking. I took a deep breath. "Well, okay, if you insist. He probably thinks you're gay or something."

JJ's steps didn't waver, his hand didn't jerk or shake, his shoulders didn't hunch. He didn't miss a beat. "I am."

*Okay. There it is.* I took a deep breath. "So do you really want to report that guy?"

Calmly, JJ came to a stop, and the dog sat. JJ smiled down at him and stroked the top of his head, scratched his ears. Then he turned toward me. "What are you talking about?"

"It's illegal."

"What is?"

"Being gay."

I almost didn't hear it. He said, "You idiot." He bent over again and rubbed the dog's shoulders between the harness straps. "I'll tell you what, Paul. If you catch me in the act, then you can call the cops. And yeah, I suppose if I'm still in that position when they get there, I'll be arrested. You think that's going to happen?" He straightened up and looked right into my eyes.

*Well that's an image I don't need in my head, thank you very much.* My face twitched into a few different shapes and I dropped my eyes. "Probably not."

"Probably not. You bet your ass, probably not."

I shrugged. "I'm not trying to start a fight, here."

He laughed. "I think if you did, this dog would take your arm off, muzzle notwithstanding." Another pat to the dog's head and he turned and took a step, the dog right with him.

Neither of us spoke until we got to the door. JJ unhooked my leash from the harness and handed it to me. "I'm going around once more with him. You take that back inside and tell them I'll be in shortly." He didn't even look at me. Just like he treated the dogs.