



EPILOGUE

Raleigh, North Carolina

Nick sat cross-legged on the cool linoleum floor in a six-by-six play cubicle at Petsmart. The cubicle reeked of disinfectant—an obnoxious combination of isopropyl alcohol and Fresh Mountain Breeze that Nick found more annoying than the urine it was meant to cover. He looked down at his folded legs, where a six-week-old puppy lay curled up sleeping in his lap.

“How are we doing here?” A young pet store worker popped his head over the top of the cubicle and smiled down on Nick like an adolescent deity.

Nick looked up. “Can you tell me the taxonomic name of this species? I’m familiar with the basic trinomial *Canis lupus familiaris*, of course, but I’m curious as to whether individual breeds represent distinct subspecies.”

The young man paused. “Whoa—you’ve got me there.”

“You sell animals here and you don’t even know their subspecies?”

“Dude, it’s a dog.”

“Thanks—I was pretty sure it wasn’t a parakeet. Do you do this for a living?”

“Me? No, just part time. I’m an undergrad at NC State.”

“Oh,” Nick said. “That explains it.”

“Hey, I think he likes you.”

Nick raised an eyebrow. “Really? What makes you think so?”

“Look at the way he’s sleeping—he’s comfortable with you.”

“So I’m basically in the same category as shag carpet.”

“Well, he’s tired right now. It’s hard to really tell their personalities until they wake up.”

“That’s what I tell my students.”

“You’re a teacher?”

“I’m a professor—at NC State.”

“Oh,” the young man said under his breath. “That explains it.”

“He seems a bit lethargic. Is he always like this?”

“Oh no, he’s usually a bundle of energy. The people who played with him before you must have worn him out.”

“He must have liked them better,” Nick said. “I could get this much action at a taxidermist.”

“Hey, that’s a good one.”

Nick looked up at the young man. “What’s your name?”

“Howie.”

“Tell me something, Howie. What exactly do you do with a dog, anyway?”

“What do you do?”

“I mean, I know you can train them and I know you can do the ‘fetch’ thing—but what do you do with them the rest of the time?”

“You don’t do anything—they just live. You know: They eat, they sleep, they lie around a lot.”

“Sort of like students.”

Howie beamed. “Yeah, like that. Didn’t you ever have a dog when you were a kid?”

“No. I had insects.”

“We sell insects here—some really cool ones. We have tarantulas, both males and females.”

“You won’t have them both for long. I noticed that you made the mistake of putting your males and females together in the same terrarium. Tarantulas aren’t communal. Whenever you put a male and a female into a confined space for an extended period of time, only one will come out alive. Try to remember that—it’s true for most species, including your own.”

“Thanks. You know, if you’re new at this we can help you get started. We have puppy education classes here—everybody brings their puppy in and you sit around together in a big room. It helps your dog get used to people.”

“No thanks—I don’t think my dog should be better adjusted than I am. How old do they have to be before you can train them?”

“About a year, I think. What do you want to train him to do?”

“Find cadavers.”

“You’re kidding. Can they do that?”

Nick looked down at the furry lump in his lap. “I’m not sure if this one can—but I know someone who could tell me. Do you sell any mongrels here?”

“Oh, no. All of our dogs are AKC certified. They have papers and everything.”

Nick paused. “I don’t have any papers—do you?”

“Nah. I suppose we’re all mongrels when it comes right down to it. Hey, I’ve got an old mongrel at home, and he’s the best. The way I figure, it doesn’t matter whether you’ve got papers or not—what matters is what you’ve got inside.”

Nick nodded. “You’re a smart guy, Howie. You can sleep in my class anytime.”

“Thanks. So what do you think?”

“About what?”

“About the dog.”

“Oh.” Nick worked his fingers under the snoozing puppy and lifted it from his lap; it sagged like a sock full of wet pasta. He looked down at his khakis and saw a wet spot the size of a saucer in precisely the wrong location.

He held the dog up to the young man. “I think I’d like to see those tarantulas.”